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Environmental Deterioration in Contemporary Appalachian Literature:
A Biblical Ecocritical Analysis of *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
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by
Alexandria Craft
May 2018

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ABSTRACT

Environmental Deterioration in Contemporary Appalachian Literature:

A Biblical Ecocritical Analysis of *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*

by

Alexandria Craft

Ron Rash's *Serena* and Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* are two contemporary Appalachian novels that have yet to be analyzed from a biblical ecocritical perspective. While some literary scholars acknowledge the environmental aspects of the novels, little of their research goes beyond examining the land and its resources as commodities or metaphorical extensions for the characters. In this thesis, I elaborate on those interpretations by scrutinizing the natural descriptions in both novels and comparing those findings to some of the landscapes and environmental verses located within the Bible. Unlike the pastoral ideal found in a portion of the literature preceding the twentieth century, contemporary Appalachian writers such as Rash and Pancake have moved away from such a bucolic, prelapsarian idealization in favor of limning a more industrialized, postlapsarian Appalachia. Following both analyses, I conclude by predicting how emerging Appalachian writers will portray the landscape in future works.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the Old Testament of the Bible, the devout character Job instructs his friends to look to the earth and its creatures for answers regarding his piety: “But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee...” (King James Version, Job 12.7-8). Although ancient, these metaphorical lines maintain their relevance when examined alongside the works of contemporary Appalachian writers. As Job advises his friends to draw insights from the Earth, the novelists Ron Rash and Ann Pancake encourage their readers to make supplementary observations via their plots and characters. Despite the fact that more environmentally-concerned individuals have been paying a great deal of attention to the abuse of natural resources in the Appalachian region, when people hear the word “Appalachia,” they still tend to associate the geographical term with idyllic images of a rural, untouched land comparable to the paradisiacal garden of Eden. For example, in Albert Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen’s *Ecotourism in Appalachia: Marketing the Mountains*, the environmental travel writing duo argues that the region “can introduce travelers to scenes of rare natural beauty, diverse and fascinating ecosystems” (7). This example illustrates how people identify Appalachia as an area brimming with Elysian beauty; however, as we will see later, these popular utopian connotations are far from accurate.

While some literary scholars of Rash’s *Serena* and Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been* acknowledge the environmental aspects of the novels, little of their work goes beyond examining the land and its resources as commodities or metaphorical extensions of the characters. For this thesis, I intend to elaborate on those preliminary interpretations of Rash and Pancake’s Appalachian settings by analyzing both *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has*

Been from a biblical ecocritical perspective. This growing critical theory allows me to scrutinize the array of natural descriptions in both novels and compare those findings to some of the central landscapes and environmental verses located within the Bible. In the book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, author Leo Marx argues that the pastoral ideal found in literature preceding the twentieth century—mainly New World texts, eighteenth-century naturalist accounts, and pre-industrialization pieces—idealizes nature conditions. For example, historian Robert Beverly begins *The History and Present State of Virginia*, one of the first printed histories about North America, by depicting America as a vibrant garden. He writes, “Have you pleasure in a Garden? All things thrive in it, most surprisingly; you can’t walk by a Bed of Flowers, but besides the entertainment of their Beauty, your Eyes will be saluted with the charming colours of the Humming Bird, which revels among the Flowers...” (qtd. in Marx 84). It is evident that Beverly views America as a new Edenic landscape, and his garden reference recalls the original beauty and profusion of creation that occurred in Genesis. Due to continued industrial advancements, however, contemporary writers such as Ron Rash and Ann Pancake have moved away from such a bucolic, prelapsarian idealization of the land in favor of limning a more mechanized, postlapsarian Appalachia. In an interview, Ann Pancake comments on the main challenge she foresees for future writers of the region:

I’ve come to believe that the greatest challenge for many twenty-first-century artists is to create literature that imagines a way forward which is not based in idealism or fantasy, which does not offer dystopia or utopia, but still turns current paradigms on their heads. (qtd. in Nicholson)

Pancake's concern indicates how contemporary Appalachian writers are meditating on future literary portrayals of the region, and it begs the question: how will emerging Appalachian fiction writers portray the landscape in their works?

Based on personal research in preparation for this study, I decided that the best way to answer such a question would be through a detailed analysis on a modern Appalachian literary work. To avert a potentially gender-biased study, it was imperative that I select two modern texts—one by a male and one by a female. In this case, I elected to read and analyze Ron Rash's *Serena* and Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, both of which are bound to influence the works of budding Appalachian writers. The novels are similar in that the writers depict Appalachian landscapes that have been impacted and altered by booming industrial companies. Moreover, both works contain primary and secondary characters who frequently comment on the landscape due to their awareness of the environmental devastation that is occurring around them.

Interestingly, the primary characters of my selected novels are mainly women. Even though men are described as the ones working for extractive companies, women seem to have more to say about the Appalachian area and how it is being altered by the other gender. In her book *Standing Our Ground: Women, Environmental Justice, and the Fight to End Mountaintop Removal*, West Virginia native Joyce Barry argues

[W]omen have a unique connection to environmental issues, not based solely or exclusively in biology, but primarily in the work they perform in their homes and communities. Because women are often responsible for providing and managing life's basic necessities... they view environmental problems in unique ways. (10)

In *Serena*, George Pemberton's wife Serena arrives at the North Carolina logging camp eager to learn about the Appalachian area and the natural resources it has to offer; even though she is partially responsible for the destruction of the land, she is described throughout the novel as having a connection with the area. Similarly, in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, Lace See and her daughter Bant seem to have an ancestral pull to the land that prompts them to stay in Yellowroot, West Virginia, and fight against the mountaintop removal company Lyon Energy.

Published in 2008, Ron Rash's *Serena* follows one timber company's desecration of the North Carolina mountain line during the early 1930s. Ruthless in nature, the protagonists George and Serena Pemberton remain more concerned with the societal power and economic successes that stem from logging the region. They seem to have little regard for the region and how their logging will impact the Appalachian environment of the future. Printed one year prior to *Serena*, Ann Pancake's environmental text *Strange as This Weather Has Been* highlights the negative ecological impacts of mountaintop removal mining in West Virginia. Told from multiple points of view, the story follows one coal mining community's struggle with the mining boom and mountaintop removal and strip mining in present day. Both texts reveal that current Appalachian writers are concerned with the region's natural environment, specifically how it has been manipulated by extractive industries such as Rash's timber business or Pancake's mountaintop removal mining company.

The Appalachia Region

As one of the oldest listed locations on early North American maps, Appalachia is a region situated on the eastern side of the United States in the Southern mountains (Williams 9). Often described as "the Great Valley," the Appalachian Mountain system is primarily known for its core sections within the following states: Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky,

Virginia, and West Virginia (Straw 4). My thesis study focuses on the Central Appalachian Mountains which is composed of the following areas: eastern Kentucky, eastern Tennessee, western North Carolina, western Virginia, and the entire state of Virginia (Fritsch and Johannsen 31). Although people refer to the Appalachian Mountains as a singular system, the area is actually more diverse than unified in its flora and fauna. Despite the extinctions of many plant and animal species, the forests within the Appalachian region are still recognized as the most diverse on Earth. Nonetheless, John Williams argues in his book *Appalachia: A History* that there are only a few varieties of plants and animals that live exclusively in the area (14).

Prior to the literary works of the twenty-first century, the Appalachian region typically has been described as paradisiacal, Edenic, or even utopian. Early explorers and naturalists recorded their observations of the virgin land and its array of flora and fauna. It becomes clear upon reading those nonfiction accounts that the Appalachia that contemporary residents have come to observe differs considerably from the untouched Appalachia that existed once upon a time. For instance, the religious naturalist William Bartram comments on the characteristics of the region during his travels in the 1770s:

Perhaps there is not any part of creation, within the reach of our observations, which exhibits a more glorious display of the Almighty hand, than the vegetable world: such a variety of pleasing scenes, every changing throughout the seasons... and assigned each to a purpose and use determined. (15)

Although the first attempt to define Appalachia was not made until the early 1860s, the uncultivated region was recognized for over one hundred years as a thriving wilderness teeming with God's creations (Williams 11).

Those creations admired so fervently by early travelers of the region would be commodified in the coming years as American cities began to grow. Between the years of 1880 and 1930, wood and coal—two primary resources located in the Appalachian region—were harvested at harmful rates without consideration for the landscape’s future (Williams 242). Unlike Bartram and other naturalists who were amazed by the diversity of the Appalachian forest, lumbermen would arrive in the flourishing wilderness, insensitive to its beauty and diversity, and leave behind nothing more than stumps (250). Similarly, coal mining companies continue to alter the natural topography of the Appalachian region by blasting away mountaintops in order to extract buried coal seams. When there is little to no coal left to be harvested, the companies seek out a new area of potential profitability with little regard for the scarred land they are leaving behind. Williams comments on the industrialization of the Appalachia area that began occurring in the early twentieth century and still occurs today despite stricter environmental government regulations:

Appalachia’s industrialization took place in hollows and hamlets, where the census measure of population density obscured the actual conditions of life. The reason for this is that Appalachian industry was primarily extractive in character. It extracted minerals from the ground and harvested trees from the forest, sending them off to markets with only a minimum of processing. (242)

Presently, the extraction of coal takes place in areas where the negative environmental and human health effects of such extractions are being reported through various media outlets.

Fortunately for the region, in the early 1920s, the notion of the frontier began to dissipate, and many Americans sought ways to identify the wilderness—natural areas like the Appalachian Mountain system—as locations worthy of preservation. One of the measures some people took to

preserve the wilderness was to create national parks systems, an approach which Rash mentions as a growing concern for the timber company in *Serena* (Lowrey 35). Gerald Lowrey, an admirer and research specialist of the Appalachian Trail, states on the evolving attitudes regarding land conservation, "... this high valuation of wilderness has not always been the case. Early in American history, the wilderness was viewed as a hindrance to settlement, an inexhaustible storehouse for raw materials or a godless zone to be exorcised and civilized" (25). Although Lowrey's comment references the past and commends the initial preservation efforts of the 1920s, it unfortunately seems that the "high valuation of the wilderness" has not changed the extant concept of land (and its accompanying resources) as a commodity. Despite the growing governmental regulations on extracting nature's goods, some corporations—such as the strip mining company described in Ann Pancake's present-day novel—still view the Appalachian area as a region with a sizeable supply of potentially profitable energy resources. That said, certain groups and individuals continue to take an interest in preserving the remaining wilderness. Even in the field of literature, scholars have recently developed the critical theory ecocriticism specifically to analyze the environmental aspects within novels.

A Brief Introduction to Ecocriticism

Coined by William Rueckert, the term "ecocriticism" did not become a common phrase until the Western Literature Association decided to recognize ecocriticism as a new critical approach to literature in 1978 (Burbery 190). Unlike some critical theories, ecocriticism is a fairly contemporary movement that continues to evolve and expand as literary scholars seek new ways to interpret the environmental aspects of texts. A pioneer of ecocriticism, Lawrence Buell writes on the founding of ecocriticism in the 1990s, "... only in the last decade has the study of literature in relation to environment begun, quite suddenly, to assume the look of a major critical

insurgency” (699). Given its rising popularity, it is important to consider how the critical theory might continue to gain recognition and engage scholars. English Professor Karla Armbruster and independent scholar Kathleen Wallace note in their introduction to *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, “A viable ecocriticism must continue to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more concerned with human cultures, by looking at the role of culture in nature, and by attending to the nature-focused text as also a cultural-literary text” (4). For this study, it is imperative to keep in mind the fictional cultures that Rash’s and Pancake’s characters live in since both cultures affect the observations and actions of the characters in relation to their Appalachian settings.

While there are multiple definitions and acknowledged interpretations of ecocriticism, environmental writer Jim Dwyer’s definition of the literary theory seems most closely to relate to this specific study. Described by Dwyer as “a critical perspective on the relationship between literature and the natural world, and the place of humanity within—not separate from—nature” (qtd. in Burberry 191). While some ecocritical literary scholars focus solely on a literary work’s relationship with its represented environmental setting, Dwyer’s interpretation of ecocriticism includes a third element—humanity’s relationship with the natural world—critical to this particular study, since a character’s relationship with his or her setting impacts the reader’s ecocritical interpretation of that setting and its corresponding earthly environment.

Furthermore, Lawrence Buell claims that studying environmental degradation alongside other

landscape-oriented ecocritical work would in the long run promise to give a far richer account than we now have of the placial basis of human and social experience, conceiving “place” not simply in the light of an imagined descriptive or symbolic

structure, not simply as social construction, not simply as ecology, but all of these three simultaneously. (707)

As readers will come to see, the Appalachian region identifies as more than merely a “place” for many of Rash’s and Pancake’s leading and supporting characters. Based on my readings, the different ways the Appalachian landscape is portrayed in *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been* beseech a scholar to analyze the settings as ecological social constructions comparable to actual past and present locations that impacted and continue to influence human interactions in the region.

While examining Rash and Pancake’s novels from a basic ecocritical perspective could be beneficial, such analyses have been done in the past (e.g. Joshua Lee’s article “The Pembertons and Corporate Greed: An Ecocritical Look at Ron Rash’s *Serena*” and Matt Wanat’s article “Dislocation, Dismemberment, Dystopia: From Cyberpunk to the Fiction of Wendell Berry and Ann Pancake.” Therefore, I sought a way to combine the critical theory with my personal interests in the deteriorating environmental conditions and seeming biblical associations within the novels. Armbruster and Wallace state, “Given the rapid growth and many accomplishments of ecocriticism during its short history, we feel that the time has come for ecocritics to review the field critically and ask what directions it might best take in the future” (1). For this study, I decided to evaluate the environmental elements of *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been* from an ecocritical perspective that some critics are arguing is the future of ecocritical theory: biblical ecocriticism.

Biblical Ecocriticism

Ecocritical theorist Lawrence Buell argues that “new insights, new revaluations of the physical world and humanity’s relation to it” could impact how individuals perceive the

environment and alter the ways in which they live their everyday lives (708). If scholars were to analyze literary texts from a biblical ecocritical approach, they might come away with new insights on not only individual texts but whole genres of literature such as Appalachian literature. According to English Professor Timothy Burbery, taking a Christian—biblical—ecocritical approach to literature could enhance the field of ecocriticism in at least three major ways (205). For one, literary scholars sensitive to Christian ideas may offer new ecocritical outlooks on canonical texts. Both Rash's *Serena* and Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* are trending Appalachian novels that already have been analyzed multiple times using an ecocritical approach. Despite the popularity of the works, however, a literary scholar has yet to use the Bible or Christianity as a way to expand a study on the environmental components of each piece.

A second way that Christian literary scholars may supplement ecocriticism is through noting the environmental references in writers who identify as Christian (Burbery 207). Because Rash and Pancake were steeped in Christian traditions as children, their past experiences with Christianity have influenced their novels, and it is not unreasonable to assume that the religious undertones of *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been* may lead a scholar to find additional environmental elements within their works that relate to the Bible and Christian faith. It is important to note that writers grew up in religious households. Raised Baptist, Ron Rash regularly attended church services in his hometown of Boiling Springs, North Carolina. In an interview, Rash acknowledges being impacted by his church's sermons, hymns, and required verse memory work (Fox). Similarly, Pancake's father was the preacher of a Presbyterian church in Summersville, West Virginia. In an interview conducted by novelist Robert Gipe, Pancake admits that although she was not very alert in church, the sermons she heard influenced her outlook on topics such as strip-mining, which her father often preached against (172). Due to

Rash's and Pancake's backgrounds in Christianity, it is worth reexamining *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been* from a biblical ecocritical approach with the expectation that supplementary insights will be made on the environmental descriptions within the texts.

The third way that a biblical ecocritical approach could benefit ecocriticism is by highlighting the activism component often associated with ecocriticism. Burberry argues that Christian environmental scholars have opportunities to enrich the existing conversations on environmental studies (208). Unlike other literary theories such as structuralism or formalism, a thorough ecocritical analysis on a fictional text could have a real-world effect on the environment. For instance, based on John Lang's findings in *Understanding Ron Rash* and my reading of *Serena*, Ron Rash's biblical background and connection to the Appalachian landscape come through in the majority of his characters who tend to exhibit religious connections to nature. Similarly, if a more conservative company were to read a biblical ecocritical analysis, there is a slight chance it may impact that company's relationship with their region of interest and how they decide to proceed in their environmental endeavors.

Interestingly, literature professors of postsecondary public institutions who note the Bible as their area of expertise make up the minority, and even fewer of those scholars identify as ecocritical theorists (Hilbert 30). Author and long-time English Professor Betsy Hilbert comments on biblical literacy and how it impacts people's perception of the environment:

How many environmentally oriented critics read the Bible these days? More than one might imagine. Fewer, probably, than ought to. In the community of ecological awareness, one often comes across a sense that traditional Western religions have historically been at fault in rationalizing and supporting traditional Western environmental destruction. Religion is blamed for the idea that human beings are separate

and above the rest of creation, leading to the “go forth and rape” mentality that has regarded nature as either a useful but disposable commodity or a hostile agent. (Hilbert 30)

Due to a lack of biblical literacy, individuals and whole companies have rationalized their domination over the land, its resources, and its animal inhabitants. Even though the “go forth and rape” notion is depicted in both *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, a literary scholar has not yet questioned if this concept stems from more than a character’s mindset that nature is disposable. A biblical ecocritical approach could reveal additional explanations for why the characters and companies—representatives of actual people and corporations—take advantage of Appalachia’s natural resources. Although some individuals consider the biblical reference to man’s dominion over the Earth as a call to do whatever they need or want with the land, dominion should not be misconstrued for domination.

It is worth noting that one of ecocriticism’s guiding principles is its notion that the environment maintains a prominent personal worth aside from humanity. Burbery argues that “such a view accords with the Genesis creation account, in which God pronounces the results of each day’s work as ‘good,’ even before humanity is created on the sixth day” (194). This biblical notion—that the natural world—is “good” is a foundational component of this particular study. Aside from its prelapsarian depictions, the Bible consists of an array of environmental references throughout the Old and New Testament. Trusted faith and culture writer Jonathan Merritt states, “We have an operator’s manual for our planet right in front of us in the Bible, and we must allow that manual to change our thinking and behavior” (22). Whether one accepts the Bible as the creation text of choice or not, it is at least worth acknowledging—as this biblical ecocritical study does—that the Bible is “green” and that comparing it to the environmental

elements of literary texts could not only expand the field of ecocriticism but retard the demolition of Earth's natural world.

The Bible and Its Environmental Elements

Before moving on to the analysis of each novel, it is important to discuss a couple of key and controversial environmental verses and themes within the Bible such as the disintegration of nature that is predicted in both the Old and New Testaments and man's dominion over the earth. If one perceives the Bible as a divinely inspired work, then the prophetic depictions of the destruction of the environment add depth to the damaging ecological transformations that are being written about in contemporary Appalachian fiction. The first chapter of the Book of Hebrews prophesizes nature's decline:

And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: They shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; And as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. (1.10-12)

These verses may be actively compared to the second law of thermodynamics—also known as the law of entropy—acknowledged by scientists since Sadi Carnot's original empirical finding in the early 1800s. Science historian Helge Kragh simplifies the law:

According to the second law of thermodynamics, an isolated system will eventually reach internal thermal equilibrium, after which time only random fluctuations about the state of equilibrium can take place. The system can never return to its former non-equilibrium state. (47)

While this law should not be interpreted as an end to the world, it should be viewed as a gradual end to world processes. Such an acknowledgment of the second law of thermodynamics may

reveal more about both *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. This scientific and biblical principle displays another reason behind the increased destruction of the Appalachian environment; however, because scientists claim the Earth is far from reaching its equilibrium, humankind identifies as the leading party behind the devolution of the environment.

When asked to describe the perfect landscape, one might say the garden of Eden. Even if that person is biblically illiterate, the divine location has been popularized through literature and contemporary entertainment to the point its utopian qualities may be readily described due to its familiarity with the general population. The prelapsarian environmental conditions described throughout the Bible, most notably in the Book of Genesis, may be contrasted to the postlapsarian details found in both *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. In his book *The Early Earth*, John Whitcomb, Jr., describes the original landscape in Genesis: “The Bible makes it clear that the early earth was an uncontaminated, highly ordered, and completely harmonious environment for the first human beings” (135). This idealistic notion seems unrealistic now at a time when natural resources are often described as the commodities of man, and after reading Rash’s and Pancake’s novels, it is clear that man’s relationship with the early Earth is nothing like man’s relationship with the Earth today.

Genesis 1.31 reads, “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, *it was* very good.” Within the first chapter of the Bible, God openly acknowledges that the environment is valuable. Upon first seeing His creation in Genesis 1.10 God deems it “good,” and He repeatedly uses that descriptor in the following verses of Chapter One: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31. Even before God creates the first people, He gives the Earth value and worth (Merritt 32). Buell argues that “The opening chapters of Genesis, the first book in Hebrew and Christian scripture, have been blamed as the root cause of western technodominationism: God’s mandate to man to

take ‘dominion’ over the creatures of the sea and earth and ‘subdue’ them” (1-2). Buell is correct in his statement that God commanded man to “have dominion” over the Earth and its creatures. Genesis 1.28 reads, “And God blessed them, and God said unto them . . . have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” In contemporary terms, man has been entrusted with the task of caring for God’s creations, and while God does give mankind dominion, such delegated authority should not be exploited. Comparable to Genesis 1.28, Genesis 2.15 states, “And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” This verse mentions some of man’s responsibilities for tending to the environmental, and it acknowledges the notion of stewardship which will be analyzed in relation to the novels in the chapters that follow.

When taken out of context, Genesis 1.28 and 2.15 lead people to believe they have full authority over the Earth, its animals, and vegetation. Merritt notes that certain environmentalists and individuals emphasize one verse over the other when they are both equally important. He writes, “What someone makes of our creation obligation often depends on which pair of action verbs they prefer. Do they factor our obligation to subdue and rule over creation or our obligation to care for and keep it?” (Merritt 44). Due to God’s repeated word choice of “good,” I would argue—within reason—that humans have an obligation to care for and keep the land.

Merritt states about such repetition,

When an ancient storyteller wanted to emphasize something, he or she would commonly use word repetition He [God] is emphasizing these words to make sure that those of us who read the creation story millennia later don’t miss the point that God takes pleasure in the goodness of His creation. (33)

In addition to the repetition, environmentalist G. P. Marsh's concept of the "great chain of being" aligns with the notion that the Earth is worth preserving. Lowrey comments on the model:

"The chain of being" idea held that all the life-forms were created by God and any given species existed for the sake of the completeness of the whole. All living things had a right to exist. From this perspective, the belief that man had dominion over the earth was seen to be absurd. The proper role for mankind was stewardship of the earth rather than the single-minded pursuit of profit which left a ravaged environment and the possible extinction of species as its legacy to the next generation. (31)

If one is willing to acknowledge the repetition within Genesis as well as Marsh's "great chain of being" theory, then he or she is likely to concede that the environment has an inherent value worthy of preservation. Both *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been* explore these larger issues of stewardship versus domination, and a biblical ecocritical analysis of each text may reveal that the movement in contemporary Appalachian literature from stewardship to dominion is related to the industrial fall of mankind. In both Rash's and Pancake's novels, this fall—symbolic of the fall of mankind that occurs after the first sin in Genesis—occurs before the first chapter begins since the effects of both Pemberton's timber company and Pancake's mountaintop removal company Lyon Energy can already be noted in both settings. That said, readers are immediately swept up into a fallen setting where the postlapsarian notion of dominion trumps the prelapsarian call to stewardship.

By analyzing Ron Rash's *Serena* and Ann Pancake's *Strange as This Weather Has Been* from a biblical ecocritical approach, it may become possible to determine how the environmental elements between Eden and Appalachia differ and why those differences matter for future Appalachian writers. In other words, these analyses will help me predict whether emerging

Appalachian fiction writers will ever return to writing about the landscape through bucolic language. If the answer is “no,” then how will the negative depictions of the landscape continue to evolve and impact people’s perception of the region? In other words, could contemporary fiction novels such as Rash’s *Serena* and Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been* warn readers about the devastation of the Appalachian environment? Following my study, I intend to discuss where I foresee the future of Appalachian writing heading and how biblical ecocriticism may help shape that path.

CHAPTER 2

A BIBLICAL ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RON RASH'S *SERENA*

Published in 2008, Ron Rash's historical fiction novel *Serena* tells the story of married couple George and Serena Pemberton and their running of the Boston Lumber Company during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Set in the mountains of North Carolina, *Serena* contains an array of Appalachian landscape descriptions. Analyzing those environmental depictions from a biblical ecocritical perspective could reveal more about Rash's plot and characters as well as provide insight on how future Appalachian fiction writers may portray the region. Scholar Joshua Lee writes about the balance between man and nature, "... it must be understood that man is inherently a part of nature, that anything [a]ffecting nature therefore must also affect man, and that man must be as much a caretaker of nature as he is of himself" (44). Interestingly, this view is similarly found in the Bible when God calls Adam, the first man, to be the caregiver of the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2.15 states, "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." Rash's *Serena* displays the impact humans—like the ruthless Pembertons—can have when the balance between man and nature tips heavier to one side. George, Serena, and their lumber company illuminate how societal power, economic successes, and material greed can lead to the demolition of a natural region like Appalachia.

Unlike early naturalist writers who were able to describe an untouched, paradisiacal land, Rash has been forced by industrialization and the greed of individuals to describe an Appalachia that is disappearing. Brown states in her article "Ron Rash's *Serena* and the 'Blank and Pitiless Gaze' of Exploitation in Appalachia":

[E]arly Appalachian ecological writing is diametrically opposed to what must be said today. William Bartram, Andre Michaux, Danial Boone, and other early travelers to and

in North Carolina presented the mountains as strong, beautiful, abundant in riches to be enjoyed, and awe-inspiring.... But Rash brings another Appalachia to the view of international audiences, an Appalachia that is frail, easily destroyed. (89)

In an interview for the *North Carolina Literary Review*, Rash stated about the Appalachia region and those who identify as residents, “Sometimes we don’t notice our places until they start to disappear, and art comes out of that tension of seeing a world disappear and being aware of that change” (qtd. in Brown 73). Born in 1953, Rash was raised in Appalachia. In *Understanding Ron Rash*, the first book-length analysis of Rash’s works, author John Lang writes about Rash’s influences, “It was Rash’s parents and grandparents who instilled in young Ron his sense of identification with the mountain South, specifically Buncombe, Watauga, and Madison Counties in western North Carolina” (2). Lang states that the rural Appalachian areas where Rash bases most of his works were already disappearing when he was a child (4). As he grew up, that disappearance of his natural homeland only accelerated. This experience suggests why so many of his novels, including *Serena*, focus on how characters react to the destruction of Appalachia.

It is worth noting that although this study examines how the biblical prelapsarian conditions and *Serena*’s Appalachian postlapsarian descriptions interact with one other, Rash’s novel contains biblical perspectives and values. When asked if he identifies as a religious man, Rash confirmed that he is, “I grew up in a culture where belief was just a given; not having it was almost beyond imagination” (qtd. in Bjerre 222-23). Rash gives credit to his religious upbringing in the Baptist Church for his many allusions to the Bible. In *Serena*, primary characters are given biblical names like Rachel and her child Jacob, the loggers’ dialogue is reminiscent of biblical passages, and the secondary character Reverend Bolick even condemns

Pemberton for his actions (Lang 84). In a 2010 interview with Stephen Fox, Rash chats about his religious background and describes some of the biblical elements in *Serena*:

The Biblical names are intentional, Rachel as a character in exile, as her namesake in the Old Testament. And her son, Jacob. You know, Jacob and Esau in the Bible. *Serena* is very much a story about who has the birthright. Rachel's story in *Serena* brings up a good point about being raised Southern Baptist.... Growing up every Sunday, hearing those stories, the richness of the language; such a great thing for a writer.

When asked in a different interview if the Bible's imagery nourishes his imagination, Rash states, "I read the Bible growing up. I think it's a great gift for a writer, particularly the King James.... It's funny. My daddy paid me \$5 to read the New Testament.... I think I was 12" (qtd. in Neufeld). Fox notes that due to Rash's religious background, "Rash has created a world of fiction and poetry that profoundly depicts the Appalachian Mountains and Foothills including its preoccupation with religious faith." It should be clarified that just because Appalachia is noted as having a "preoccupation with religious faith," regional authors are not required to share that faith; however, in Ron Rash's case, the Bible has had a notable impact on his work, and a biblical ecocritical analysis may reveal even more about his characters and plot.

When compared to the prelapsarian landscape described in the opening two chapters of Genesis, Rash's *Serena* reveals just how much one region can be manipulated in such a short amount of time by a single group of people. Even though as a culture, people have cultivated an image of Eden's perfection that Genesis does not describe, the two chapters of prelapsarian descriptions provided in the Bible along with the array of literary and biblical scholarship on those chapters allow for a thorough comparison between the Garden of Eden and more contemporary, postlapsarian landscapes. Whereas the fall of mankind does not occur until the

third chapter of *Genesis*, when readers open to the first page of *Serena*, they are immediately placed in a post-fall setting since Pemberton's timber company has been at work in the region for roughly a year already. Although *Serena* covers only three years—roughly 1929 to 1932—readers become aware that the lumber company will have a devastating and everlasting influence on Appalachia, specifically the ecological systems “of Haywood and Jackson Counties west of Asheville” (Lang 82). Set at a time when conservationists were trying to form the national park system, *Serena* does more than merely display the exploitation of Appalachia and foreshadow its after effects, it also captures the original environmental conservation efforts of historical figures like Horace Kephart. Brown argues:

Serena is at once a novel of the Appalachian past and of the American present . . . the book chronicles the historic struggle of the timber barons, who were shearing off the mountain forest, against the preservationists, who were trying to create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. (75)

Such stark contrasts between the Pembertons and their conservation counterparts allow for a more expansive biblical ecocritical analysis of *Serena*.

Lee notes about humankind's relationship with environment in his article “The Pembertons and Corporate Greed: An Ecocritical Look at Ron Rash's *Serena*,” “The destruction of the environment leads ultimately to the destruction of ourselves and all living things, because we are as much a part of the environment as the creatures and plants we destroy” (59). Rash's *Serena* illustrates how one couple pushes their timber company to economic gains despite the knowledge that their actions are destroying not only the Appalachian landscape but themselves and their marriage as well. For convenience and clarity, the biblical ecocritical analysis of *Serena* that follows is broken down into the following sections: The Appalachian Landscape in *Serena*,

Men and the Mountains, Serena and the Land, Machines in the Mountains, Trees and Cutting in the Appalachian Forests, and Wildlife in *Serena*.

The Appalachian Landscape in Serena

Rash's novel opens with George Pemberton's returning by train to the North Carolina mountains with his new wife, Serena. When the train arrives in Waynesville, the Pembertons are greeted by Rachel (a young lumber camp working girl pregnant with Pemberton's child), her father Harmon, and George's work partners, Buchanan and Wilkie. After a fight ensues between Harmon and Pemberton, Harmon is left to die of his wounds while the Pembertons, Buchanan, and Wilkie drive the six remaining miles to the camp (Rash 10). Although Rash takes the first dozen pages or so to set up the storyline that will drive the plot of *Serena*, it is not long before he starts referencing the Appalachian landscape. Rash writes about the traveling foursome and the land they encounter, "They were soon out of Waynesville, the land increasingly mountainous and less inhabited, the occasional slant of pasture like green felt woven to a rougher fabric" (13). While Rash uses the noun "pasture" to describe the land, the word "occasional" precedes that noun, which gives the reader the sense that the bucolic imagery is not going to last. As they are driving, Pemberton stops the car to give Serena a better view of what his company has accomplished in less than a year's time. Rash describes the Appalachian landscape:

Pemberton reached for Serena's hand and they walked to the drop-off's edge. Below, Cove Creek Valley pressed back the mountains, opening a square mile of level land. At the valley's center was the camp, surrounded by a wasteland of stumps and branches. To the left, Half Acre Ridge had been cut bare as well. On the right, the razed lower quarter of Noland Mountain. As it crossed the valley, the railroad track appeared sewn into the lowland like stitches. (13-14)

Unlike the previous quote which describes the pastures and scrubs as naturally “woven” parts of the land, Rash depicts the railroad tracks as being sewn into the landscape “like stitches.” This simile highlights that the tracks—inserted by Pemberton’s men—are unnatural, industrial additions made to mend the wounded land together in a more economical way. Both of these vivid descriptions of the land foreshadow the main actions to come and mimic the character’s emotions and inner thoughts.

Within the above except, Rash uses the word “wasteland” to reference the area around the lumber camp, not the only time Rash employs the word to describe the Appalachian setting. Lang notes that Rash uses the word “wasteland” “at least seven times in portraying that devastation and uses the phrase ‘stumps and slash’ even more often to describe what remains on the landscape, the term *slash* linking that despoiling of the natural environment to the Pembertons’ and Galloway’s murders of people” (86). Lang’s analogy between destroying the natural environment and murdering humankind may seem exaggerated; however, it is worth considering how the comparison relates to the creation account found in Genesis. The last verse in the first chapter of Genesis reads, “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, *it was* very good.” In the Genesis account, as God creates, he often repeats that his creations are “good.” Merritt notes on the recurring word choice, “Accompanying each demonstration of God’s power is a statement about God’s passion for the planet, and after God constructs humankind He stops” (26). Even though the various Bible translations make it clear that God values his human creations most, his land and animal creations should not be viewed as any less worthy of conservancy since God uses the same descriptor—good—to describe both the Earth and humankind. Scholar Joshua Lee argues that because the Pembertons were so concerned with material wealth, they are blind to the devastation that they cause. He states about the pair, “With

such a callous disregard for human life, seeing people more as a cost rather than a living, breathing person ... it is no wonder that ... the slaying of trees did not concern them” (Lee 54). Just as Lang links the murdering humans to the slashing of trees, Lee observes that the Pembertons appear to have just as much disregard for the land as they do for people.

After viewing the land, Serena, George, and his business partners get back into the Packard and travel into the valley. The third-person narrator observes that “The road became rockier, the gullies and washouts more pronounced. They drove through a creek clogged with silt, then more woods until the woods were gone and they were driving across the valley floor” (Rash 15). Descriptive words like “gullies” and “washouts” make Rash’s Appalachian setting seem treacherous and less utopian by highlighting one of the effects of clearcutting, that water finds less resistance when more trees are cut. Once they arrive and settle into the camp, Serena joins the cutting crews for a day’s work. Rash writes, “Serena rode out behind the cutting crews as they followed the train tracks toward the south face of Noland Mountain, passing through acres of stumps that, from a distance, resembled grave markers in a recently vacated battlefield” (23). Since this novel is set in the early 1930s, this reference to the battlefield may make the reader think of the massive number of lives lost during the First World War. Similar battlefield and graveyard imagery return at the close of the novel. After the last tree has been cut, the logger Snipes states about the empty land, “... there’s been so much killed and destroyed it can’t ever be alive again. Even for them that wasn’t around when it happened, it’d lay heavy on them too. It’d be like trying to live in a graveyard” (Rash 335). Comparing acres of downed trees to lives lost in war gives readers the feeling that Pemberton’s lumber company is annihilating much of the Appalachian mountainside as if he and his company have declared war on the natural world, its resources being spoils of battle.

According to travel writers Albert Fritsch and Kristin Johannsen, the Central Appalachian Mountain range that makes up the setting of Rash's novel "stretches northeast to southwest as the eastern spine of the continent; they are older mountains Though they have a more smooth and worn look, they are covered with temperate forests, graced with verdant valleys and swift, clear-running streams" (31). This modern description of the Appalachian region is comparable to some of the landscape descriptions found throughout Rash's novel. Because there are characters like Serena and Lowenstein in *Serena* who are concerned with making a profit from the land, Rash includes many sardonic paradisiacal descriptions of the land similar to the idyllic description of the Central Appalachian Mountain range included above. For instance, when describing the future lumber site in Jackson County and the lumber company's capacity for hiring men, Snipes states, "One of them on the porch steps picked up his axe and said he was headed to Jackson County, and a good dozen men up and followed like he was Moses leading them to the promised land" (218). Interestingly, this passage compares the future site of construction to the promised land described in the Bible. Although not a prelapsarian location, the promised land is described in the Bible as a utopian refuge for the children of Israel "that floweth with milk and honey" (Deut. 31.20). Aside from Pemberton and Serena, many Appalachian inhabitants within *Serena* see the value in the land and its resources, and Rash uses the phrase "promised land" in a satirical manner to describe a flourishing landscape that will be destroyed by the people.

Moreover, in Part III of *Serena*, Harris, Serena, Calhoun, Lowenstein, and Pemberton discuss future business opportunities within the area. Not only are the Pembertons taking advantage of the timber above ground, but their business partner Harris is taking the resources below ground as well. Unfamiliar with the region, Lowenstein states, "I would never have

believed such riches could be in these hinterlands” (Rash 237). While all the characters note the worth of the Appalachian region, they are not capable of looking beyond the profits they may make. Even their reactions to the destruction of the land are positive. Early in the novel, Harris “paused to nod approvingly at the valley’s stumps and slash” and tells Pemberton, “You’ve done well here” (Rash 28). Harris’s praise is comparable to God’s referring to his creations as “good”; however, in this case, the destruction of the creation is acknowledged as good and acceptable. This comparison illustrates that Pemberton and his business partners’ obsessive desires for power and economic success have driven them to adopt skewed postlapsarian views on the Appalachian region antithetical to God’s opinions of the land.

Looking beyond what the Appalachian region has to offer, Serena discusses the future of their company with her husband George. Based on her own research, she encourages Pemberton to move to Brazil, another landscape teeming with trees. Serena states, “Virgin forests of mahogany and no law but nature’s law” (Rash 29). This sentence reveals much about the mindset of Serena and Pemberton. At a time when the federal government is beginning to regulate tree cutting, Serena describes the ability to take from the land freely as “nature’s law.” Instead of using the land to survive, she intends to continue abusing the land because it fits her purposes. She does not consider “God’s law,” which Merritt states allows humans “the right to use the creation in order to meet our needs” (64). In the second chapter of Genesis, God gives Adam and Eve access to every tree in Eden aside from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The first humans have everything they need to live; however, due to temptations, they go against God’s law and take what is unnecessary. 1 Timothy 6.9 reads, “But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.” This verse, along with the original temptation of Eve and Adam, is comparable to

Serena and her husband, who place “nature’s law” above government regulations and God’s law to take advantage of the land available—in this case, the Appalachian region and potentially Brazil—and satisfy their personal greed.

Men and the Mountains

Throughout *Serena*, Rash includes male characters who interact with the environment in an array of ways. Soon after the novel opens, Pemberton observes the “gangly mountaineers” around him (Rash 7). Rash writes, “It struck Pemberton that males in these mountains rarely stood upright. Instead they leaned into some tree or wall whenever possible” (4). Based on Rash’s description, it would appear as if the men are connected to the land since they lean into it when given the chance. At the same time, the quotation suggests that the men display a weakness of spirit since they shift from being “upright” when the opportunities present themselves. After God creates the land in Genesis 1, he proceeds to make mankind out of that land. Genesis 2.7 reads, “And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Perhaps Rash describes his mountain men as resting against trees or land formations in order to display the original connection between the land and mankind. Bible scholar Henry Morris notes that “God used the ‘dust of the ground’ to make man’s body, a remarkable phrase conveying the thought that the smallest particles of which the earth was composed . . . were also to be the basic physical elements of the human body” (85). Moreover, even the New Testament references the notion that “The first man *is* of the earth, earthy” (1 Cor. 15.47). Despite this notion, however, Pemberton appears to be disconnected from the Appalachian land, perhaps because he is in the area only to take advantage of its natural resources.

Joyce Brown argues in her article “Ron Rash’s *Serena* and the ‘Blank and Pitiless Gaze’ of Exploitation in Appalachia” that George Pemberton “undergoes no great change in the course of the novel: he is vicious and greedy from the opening scene” (78). Although he describes the Appalachian region as “primitive,” he maintains a purely economic and materialistic view of the area (Rash 19). Brown further notes that “Pemberton’s narrowly utilitarian view of the landscape and its inhabitants is indicative of the destructive disregard historically found in users of the Appalachian Mountains” (78). Because *Serena* is regarded as historical fiction, Pemberton should not be viewed as an outlier who takes advantage of the landscape. Instead, he should be seen by readers as representing the majority of businessmen who came—and still come—to Appalachia in hope of turning a profit from the land.

The Bible discusses man’s responsibility for the land in Genesis 2.15, “And the Lord God took the man, and put him in the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.” God assigns Adam the duty of caring for Eden, a favored place of God’s creation. According to Morris, Adam is to exercise “a careful and loving stewardship over it [the garden of Eden], keeping it beautiful and orderly, with every component in place and in harmonious relationship with the whole” (92-93). It seems that Pemberton is either not familiar with this biblical concept or he knows it and has chosen to ignore it. Regardless, he is not concerned with maintaining the Appalachian ecological systems that flourish around him. As the Pemberton’s marriage begins to fall apart over George’s illegitimate child, Jacob, and Serena’s miscarriage, Pemberton returns to the ridge where he first showed Serena the lumber company’s swath of land. Rash describes Pemberton’s reflections, “He stepped to the precipice and looked down at the vast dark gash they’d made on the land. Pemberton stared at the razed landscape a long time, wanting it to be enough” (261). One may read this passage as both a commentary on Pemberton’s wishing his and Serena’s conquering of

the forests were enough to keep her happy as well as his acknowledging that he will never be fully satisfied despite how many trees he and his company slash down for profit. Regardless, Pemberton is a dark contrast to the first human man, and the differences between the two men reveal just how far man has removed himself from the dust through which he was made.

To expand on the notion of stewardship expressed in Genesis 2.15, Jonathan Merritt writes in his book *Green like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet*, “Environmental stewardship, as Scripture defines it, must take into account that at no point did God ever give humans ownership of the earth. He gave us authority. These are very different” (46).

Unfortunately, the characters of *Serena*, especially the Pembertons, do not differentiate between ownership and authority. Whereas Adam knows that he is to be God’s steward over creation, Pemberton not once acknowledges himself as a steward of the land. In fact, he never even considers the ecological consequences associated with his company’s deforestation of the Appalachian area. Pemberton openly acknowledges that what he and his company are doing is destroying the region around them. He states to Serena, “Kephart told me at the first meeting how it pleased him to know I’d die and eventually my coffin would rot, and how then I’d be nourishing the earth instead of destroying it” (Rash 117). This passage appears to reference Genesis 3.19 which reads, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” When combined with Pemberton’s statement, this verse reveals that more environmentally oriented characters such as Kephart believe the only time Pemberton will be a steward of the land is when he dies and returns to dust to nourish the Earth. As for what the term “stewardship” means today, climate and environmental specialist John Berger remarks, “True stewardship of natural forests *requires* the preservation of natural ecological functions and processes. By contrast, industrial

forestry tends to employ a capital-intensive agricultural model emphasizing the commodity production of trees, rather than protection of the forest as an ecosystem” (101). Based on this definition, there are still versions of Pemberton’s character today who do not exhibit the trait of stewardship exhibited by Adam in the original creation story.

Intriguingly, it is a tree in the garden of Eden that tempts man to commit the first sin on Earth. After Adam and Eve consume fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge of good and evil, God sends Adam and his wife “from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken” (Gen. 3.23). Sometimes, individuals—perhaps Pemberton himself—take this verse as God’s giving man permission to make use of the natural land; however, it is important to realize that this authorization stems from the notion that before Adam and Eve have sinned, their food is provided for them by the trees of the garden: “And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat” (Genesis 2.16). One notes that the pair has always used what is offered by the trees, and in Genesis 3.23, God simply informs the pair that outside the garden of Eden they will need to secure food through their own physical labors. He never gives them the authority to take advantage of the natural world outside of Eden; however, that is what man has come to do in the literary world of *Serena* as well as the physical world.

Aside from Pemberton, there are other male characters in *Serena*—most of whom are loggers, business partners, or rivals of Pemberton—who have some form of a relationship with the Appalachian region as well. The most overt reference between the Bible and the men in *Serena* occurs after a morning of logging. Rash writes, “A cold rain had fallen all day, and by mid-morning the workers resembled half-formed Adams dredged from the mud, not yet molded to human” (176). Most of the loggers who work for Pemberton’s company are there to provide for their families, and, unlike Pemberton’s business partners or rivals, they openly comment and

question their involvement in the destruction of the land. For example, while surveying “the scalped ridges of Noland Mountain,” one of the loggers, Ross, poses a question of concern to his workmates, “So what happens when there ain’t nothing left alive at all?” (Rash 159). Another logger, Snipes, states in the same conversation that “Everything in the world has its natural place, and if you take something out or put something in that ought not to be out or in, everything gets lopsided and out of sorts” (158-59). Except for the male characters fighting for preservation, only the loggers comment on how human intervention within the natural world has impacted the Appalachian region and question what will happen to the area when everything natural has been uprooted and destroyed. At the close of the novel as the loggers observe the land, the word “wasteland” returns when McIntyre, a logger who identifies as a preacher and often rattles off religious maxims, looks at the devastated landscape: “McIntyre raised his eyes and contemplated the wasteland strewn out before him where not a single live thing rose. The other men also looked out on what was in part their handiwork and grew silent” (Rash 336). The men are cognizant of their roles in the destruction of the land, and when asked what he thinks, McIntyre states, “I think this is what the end of the world will be like” (336). None of the loggers disagrees with his statement, and the reader realizes at last that the damage Pemberton, Serena, and their company has done to the Appalachian region is comparable to an apocalyptic future.

Serena and the Land

Unlike the men in Rash’s novel, Serena is portrayed by observers such as the loggers as having a connection with the Appalachian area even though she has a hand in its destruction. Standing taller than some of the men at five feet, nine inches, Serena arrives at the camp with the intention of being more than merely Pemberton’s wife; she anticipates being his primary business partner (Rash 5). Rash writes about Serena’s eagerness to learn the Appalachian area of

North Carolina, “Serena was gone all morning, getting familiar with the landscape, learning the names of workers and ridges and creeks” (27). The daughter of a lumber company owner in Colorado, Serena has been taught all about taking advantage of the land at a young age, and she applies her knowledge to eventually take over her husband’s company and move to Brazil (Rash 22). In an interview with Fox Rash states about Serena and her life after the novel ends, “My title character Serena has no accountability; she is outside the pale of humanity.... [A]fter she exploits Western North Carolina and leaves it barren, she ends up in Sao Paolo, Brazil, as a business partner of the Nazi Joseph Mengele and his West German Tractor Company.” Serena is easily more destructive than Pemberton, and, unlike her husband, she learns to exploit the land and wildlife of Appalachia to her advantage.

Within the novel, Serena is described by the loggers as a “godly” figure. Rash describes her descent into the work area, “Threads of sunlight appeared to have woven themselves into Serena’s cropped hair, giving it the appearance of shone brass. She sat upright on the gelding, the eagle perched on the leather gauntlet as if grafted to her arm” (134). As the loggers watch her arrive, Wilkie says admiringly, “There’s a true manifestation of the godly” (Rash 134). Serena is constantly depicted as working with nature in order to benefit from it. Moreover, the way that Serena interacts with her husband is comparable to Eve, the first woman created in Genesis. God makes Eve so that Adam will not be alone, and Morris notes, “The way in which God made the first woman is certainly not what one would naturally expect. It would seem rather that He would form her body in the same way He did Adam’s—directly out of the earth itself. But instead He ‘built’ her out of the body of Adam! Adam’s life would become her life” (99). Serena and Pemberton’s lives are as one, and, during a complicated childbirth that unfortunately ends in the death of their baby, Pemberton gives blood to his dying wife in order to save her; this scene in

the novel is comparable to the biblical scenes of Adam giving up a rib or sinning in the garden of Eden in order to have Eve (Rash 205). Relatedly, in *Serena*, Serena and George's stillborn baby is compared to clay.

It may be argued that the biggest similarity between Serena and Eve is their admiration for trees. Genesis 3.6 reads, "And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat." It should be noted that while Eve does receive instructions from two authority figures—God and Adam—not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Serena is not given any such instruction. Instead, she is encouraged at a young age by her father to take advantage of trees since they can make one rich (Rash 25). Based on Eve's observations of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Morris predicts why the tree might have appealed to her:

To her, it seemed that the tree was: (1) "good for food" (that is, something appealing to the physical, bodily appetites); (2) "pleasant to the eyes" (that is, something appealing to the emotions—the esthetic senses); (3) "desired to make wise" (that is, appealing to the mind and spirit, and to one's pride of knowledge and spiritual insight). (113)

Just like Eve, Serena finds the forests of Appalachia—and later Brazil—pleasant; however, unlike Eve, Serena is tempted only by the monetary goods the trees offer. At the end of the novel, as the Pembertons toast to their new partnerships and George's thirtieth birthday, Serena raises her wine glass and states, "To partnerships, and all that's possible The world is ripe, and we'll pluck it like an apple from a tree" (Rash 340). Although no one knows exactly what fruit Eve takes from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Serena's statement is clearly an

intertextual reference to Genesis, and she, like Eve, is tempted by the societal and monetary “fruits” the trees of Appalachia and Brazil have to offer.

Joyce Brown, a professor recognized by Rash as having an influence on his decision to become a writer, comments on Serena’s character, “After the stillbirth of their child, Serena focuses fully on her ambition to move to Brazil where mahogany is abundant and critical observers non-existent. She opens her huge Saratoga trunk, which contains all the information needed to begin a lumber operation in Brazil” (82). Serena’s change in attitude impacts her marriage to Pemberton, and it seems that the loss of a child and her inability to have another incite Serena to move on and away from the Appalachian region. A man takes a photograph of Serena and her husband at the camp, and the photo is described by Serena in the “Coda” of *Serena* as “a nostalgic indulgence” (Rash 369). Brown argues that the photograph reveals more about Serena than merely her relationship with Pemberton. She argues, “. . . it more likely reflects her sense of herself as all powerful, as she looks down both upon Pemberton, over whom she exercised the power of life and death, and upon the wasteland they created together” (83). Just as Eve is known as being the reason Adam falls into temptation, Serena leads Pemberton down a path to his death, and the only thing they produce during their marriage is a postlapsarian wasteland that may be contrasted to the abundance of plant life God originally creates at the beginning of Genesis.

Machines in the Mountains

The Boston Lumber Company in *Serena* uses an array of materials and machinery to excel in their work. Ron Rash’s descriptions of the machines operating in the Appalachian wild allow for vivid comparisons between the natural world and material world. In Part I of *Serena*,

Rash describes the loggers' process of trekking up the Appalachian mountainside and using the machinery:

The loggers passed the Shay train engine they called a sidewinder and the two coach cars that brought and returned workers who lived in Waynesville, then the six flatcars for timber and the McGiffert loader and finally at the spur's end the hi-lead skidder already hissing and smoking, the boom's long steel cables spooling off the drums and stretching a half mile upward.... From a distance, the boom resembled a huge rod and reel, the cables like cast lines. The boom angled toward the mountain, and the cables were so taut it looked as if the whole mountain was hooked and ready to be dragged down the tracks to Waynesville. (23-24)

This lengthy excerpt shows how the machinery is being used by the loggers to manipulate the land. Rash offers readers fishing imagery by referring to the mountain as "hooked," a word that makes it sound and appear as if the natural world is being dragged into the material world. Moreover the "long steel cables" and "hissing and smoking" material items and sounds disrupt the natural world, and the setting of Rash's novel with all its machinery acts as an antithesis to the garden of Eden, a prelapsarian region where "God 'planted' a beautiful garden, in which were growing beautiful fruit trees of every kind, each already laden with delicious fruits" (Morris 86-87).

As the workers travel up the Appalachian mountainside to their logging area, Rash compares their tools to ancient instruments reminiscent of the lyres described in the Bible. He writes, "All the while, the air grew thinner as the workers made their way up the steep incline toward tools hidden under leaves, hung on tree branches like the harps of the old Hebrews" (24). In this quotation, the man-made tools and machinery belonging to Pemberton's logging company

are described as ornament-like decorations adorning the trees. Lang writes about the inclusion of tools in *Serena*: “Rash’s intricate knowledge of the tools and equipment of the logging industry, as well as of the fatal occupational hazards the men confront, imbues the book with a gritty realism, a vividness and authenticity...” (90). Rash’s postlapsarian setting—a place where tools are attached to trees like mechanical limb substitutes—may be contrasted to God’s prelapsarian creations to illustrate just how far man has come in manipulating the land.

During the third day of creation, Genesis 1.11 shares that God forms vegetation: “And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, *and* the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed *is* in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.” A couple of verses later, Genesis 1.29 reads, “And God said, Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed, which *is* upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which *is* the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meet.” After God creates plant life, he “saw that *it was* good” (Gen. 1.12). Even though Adam is called in Genesis 2.15 to “dress it [the garden of Eden] and to keep it,” there is no mention of machinery in Eden. Morris notes, “Even though there were as yet no noxious weeds, the ground was so fertile and the plant cover so luxuriant that its growth needed to be channeled and controlled” (92). While Morris does not go into detail on how Adam was supposed to till, he does state that Adam was to exercise “a careful and loving stewardship over it” (92). Morris’s commentary leads me to believe that if Adam did have tools to help him tend to the garden of Eden, those tools were not used to destroy the land but to keep it orderly. Adam and Eve are nourished by the trees and their fruits so they had no need or desire to hide tools under the leaves or hang them in branches. The land and its vegetation had already been acknowledged as “good” without the mechanical additions that Pemberton and his crew of loggers added to the Appalachian forests.

As Pemberton's lumber company finishes its work on the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina, Pemberton and Serena take a moment to survey what was left to do:

She [Serena] patted the Arabian's flank and moved off a few paces to check the depth a steel cable had bitten into a hickory stump. Pemberton looked down at the camp. The sun shone full on the train tracks, and the linked metal gleamed. Soon it would be time to pull up the rails, starting with the spurs and moving backward to undo what they'd bolted to the land. (Rash 249)

This excerpt reveals that Pemberton and Serena were both cognizant that the steel cables and linked metal are not originally components of the Appalachian landscape. Pemberton and his mountain crew have manipulated the land as they have needed to make the most profit in the shortest time. Unlike Adam, who dresses and keeps the garden of Eden as it is, Pemberton brings unnatural machinery into the Appalachian region and uses the materials to his advantage to strip what he wants from the land. Morris remarks on Adam's responsibilities during the prelapsarian time, "Adam was told to 'keep' the garden. The word means actually to 'guard' it. There is no thought involved of protecting it from external enemies, of which there were none, but rather that of exercising a careful and loving stewardship over it" (92). After the initial creation of the Earth, no humans sought to take advantage of its resources; however, over time, some of the descendants of Adam—such as Pemberton and his business partners—become the "external enemies" of Earth instead of the protectors.

Trees and Cutting in the Appalachian Forests

Because the novel is based around the Boston Lumber Company's exploitation of the Appalachian landscape, trees and the harvesting of them are central to the novel and development of characters like George and Serena Pemberton. When *Serena* opens, Pemberton's

company has been operating in the North Carolina mountains for around a year. Within the first dozen pages, readers are introduced to a variety of trees and landmarks specific to the Appalachian region. As Pemberton introduces Serena to the area and all of its natural resources, Rash describes the scene, “Pemberton pointed to an immense tree rising out of the woods behind the saw mill. An orange growth furred the bark, and the upper branches were withered, unleafed” (12). Referencing the Chestnut blight in front of them, Serena comments that it takes that particular type of tree years to die, and she states about the species, “That gives us all the time we need, but also a reason to prefer mahogany” (Rash 13). She, like Pemberton, does not see the natural beauty in the trees around them. Instead, they are concerned with profit and what species of trees can make them the most money. In the Old Testament, God warns the Israelites not to destroy trees. Deuteronomy 20.19 reads: “When thou shalt besiege a city... thou shalt not destroy the trees thereof by forcing an axe against them: for thou mayest eat of them, and thou shalt not cut them down (for the tree of the field *is man’s life*) ...”. In *Serena*, it is not the tree of the field that is Pemberton’s “life” but the economic “fruits” of that tree that sustain him and tempt him to cut away more.

Throughout *Serena*, Rash’s environmental references to the Appalachian landscape and its dying trees seem best to identify with the growing sub-genre of environmental dystopianism, a sub-genre that includes Appalachian novels such as Ann Pancake’s *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (Beilfuss 392). In his article “Rootedness and Mobility: Southern Sacrifice Zones in Ron Rash’s *Serena*,” Michael Beilfuss argues that within *Serena*, “The descriptions of the wasted mountainsides, the cataloguing of vanishing species, the loss of habitat, the separation of humans and their environment—all attest to a dystopian reality in the aftermath of the Boston Lumber Company” (392). While *Serena* may not initially feel dystopian, as the novel progresses

the character observations and descriptions of the landscape become more concerning. For example, as the loggers finish up their work in North Carolina, they observe what remains around them: “A breeze stirred a white oak’s high limbs. It was the last hardwood on the ridge, and a few scarlet leaves fell like an early surrendering” (Rash 301). Shortly after this observation, Preacher McIntyre suggests to his co-workers that mankind’s desire for wealth will lead to what Beilfuss terms as an “ecological apocalypse” (392). While the phrase ecological apocalypse may seem like an extreme exaggeration, actual facts on logging seem to reveal that such a phrase is not an overstatement at all. In his *Appalachia: A History*, Appalachian State University Professor John Williams notes:

In a generation that saw rapid change, the greatest change of all was the disappearance of the Appalachian forest. As late as 1870, two-thirds of West Virginia was covered by old-growth forest, amounting to at least 10,000,000 acres. By 1900 this figure had been reduced by half; in 1910, by more than four-fifths. The virgin forest was gone, except for the pathetic remnants of a few hundred acres, by 1920. (250)

While this statistic describes the loss of forests in West Virginia, similar losses of old-growth forests occurred in other parts of Appalachia, including the area where *Serena* is set.

As for how the trees and cutting of them in *Serena* relate to the Bible, Merritt offers a worthy point: “We often overlook the fact that the first sin involved a tree, a vital part of creation. When Adam sinned, he didn’t just sin against God, but also against creation” (52). In Romans 5.12, the apostle Paul explains, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world....” While Eve technically has committed the first sin, the eyes of the pair are not opened until Adam eats the fruit, and, unlike Eve whose punishment affects only women, Adam’s punishment impacts all of creation since it curses the ground (Genesis 3.6-19). If readers of

Serena look to the creation story described in the Book of Genesis, then they will see what an important role a tree plays in the first temptation of Adam and Eve. Morris comments on the first human sin:

As Eve, having allowed her mind and emotions to be influenced by the Satanic suggestions of doubt and pride, continued to gaze at the forbidden tree, its fruit seemed to become more and more beautiful and delectable all the time. It is remarkable that the particular attributes of this fruit that seemed so tempting are the same as the overt characteristics of practically every type of temptation which man faces today. (113)

Rash's leading characters Pemberton and Serena seem to have allowed greed and pride to influence their opinions of the environment and its resources. George Pemberton even exclaims, "Give us a lifetime and Mrs. Pemberton and I will cut down every tree, not just in Brazil but in the world" (Rash 346). Similar to Eve, Pemberton and his wife have gazed at the tempting trees and experienced their monetary fruits for so long that their seared consciences—a biblical concept found in 1 Timothy 4.1-2—can no longer distinguish between what is and is not environmentally acceptable, not they would necessarily care if they could. Beilfuss notes that "For Serena, the Smoky Mountains are just a stop along her way from logging operations that began with her father in Colorado, and will end with her in the Amazon, clearing the forests of the global South, where labor and land are even cheaper" (393). Serena never intends to stop her excessive logging of trees despite the environmental destruction she causes in regions like the Smoky Mountains. She is too tempted by the trees in other areas of the world to stop and consciously consider the graveyard of stumps she is leaving behind.

In his piece "The Botanical Garden," Appalachian Trail hiker Charles Konopa reminds his readers that "There is no mechanical substitute for a tree. In addition to providing food and

abode for birds and wildlife, trees offer shade and shield the earth from the sun's fire" (141). Unfortunately, Pemberton, Serena, and their business partners are blinded by their present successes, and they are not concerned with looking far enough into the future and admitting the significant ecological impact their clearcutting will have on the Appalachian region in the decades and even centuries to come. In fact, it is only the loggers and conservationists in *Serena* who recognize the tree as a vital component of the ecosystem.

For George, the less profitable vegetation of the Appalachian area such as dogwood, rhododendron, and scrub oak is described only as a nuisance. Rash writes about Pemberton's mentality towards such plant life, "Pemberton suspected someday soon there'd be a poison to eradicate such valueless trees and shrubs and make it easier to cut and haul out hardwoods" (231). It is important to note that in *Genesis*, the grasses, herbs, bushes, shrubs, large wood trees, and fruit-bearing trees are all described as "good" by God. He does not identify one form of plant life as having more value than another. Pemberton's referring to certain trees as "valueless" is a blatant disregard for God's creations, and it highlights just how far mankind has come from the stewardship Adam exhibits over the plants during prelapsarian times.

From the beginning of *Serena*, the cutting of trees is viewed as a game. Soon after Serena arrives at camp, she makes a wager with the logger Bilded over who can get the closest estimate on the "total board feet" of a cane ash tree that had only been left standing in camp due to the shade it provided (Rash 22). When Bilded questions how they will know who is closest, Pemberton states, "I'll have it cut down and taken to the saw mill.... We'll know who won by this evening" (22). After Bilded bets two weeks of his pay, the men get to work cutting down the cane ash: "The two sawyers got down on one knee and gripped the hickory handles with both hands and began, wedges of bark crackling and breaking against the steel teeth" (26-27). The

words Rash chooses to use to describe the event make it seem as if the tree is fighting against being cut. The bark crackles out in opposition, but the steel teeth of the tools win out in the end. Even though it is not necessary to cut down the tree, Pemberton and Serena do it to show Serena's many strengths and gain the respect of the crew. To them, the cane ash is expendable.

Wildlife in Serena

Like the trees in *Serena*, the wildlife also plays an important role in displaying just how far mankind has strayed from prelapsarian times. Based on his ecocritical reading of the Bible, Merritt makes the following claim:

God has blessed us with incredible wildlife. These populations are robust in the face of incredible disturbances and disasters, but humanity can still be a daunting and destructive force. As a result of human actions, the very creatures that Adam carefully named are disappearing from the face of our planet. Contrary to popular wisdom, hunting is not the primary reason for declines in animal populations; the main threat is habitat loss from urban expansion and the conversion of natural systems to agriculture. (109)

The hunting and habitat loss that Merritt notes as the main reasons for the decline in animal species are both mentioned on multiple occasions in *Serena*. It is evident from the beginning of the novel that the loggers feel threatened by some of the regional animals, particularly the rattlesnake.

Rash writes about the regional species, "As the men made their way through the stumps and brush they called slash, their eyes considered where they stepped, for though snakes rarely stirred until the sun fell full on the slopes, the yellow jackets and hornets offered no such respite" (24). After multiple men are killed by rattlesnakes, Serena decides to train an eagle to hunt the rattlesnakes; however, doing so has several negative side effects, the major one being that it

creates an imbalance in the regional ecosystem. Lang argues, “When Serena trains a Mongolian Birkute eagle to hunt rattlesnakes—creatures that she sees as bad only because they slow the crew’s work and thus reduce profits, not because the snakes harm the loggers—she disrupts the ecological balance that had kept the workers’ housing largely rat-free” (87). While Serena may have spared lives in the process, her intentions for training the eagle are not pure. The only reason that she feels led to do something about the rattlesnakes is because they are reducing the company’s profits, and introducing an exotic eagle to the region defies the natural order of the area and has both immediate and long-term consequences.

Aside from rattlesnakes, Rash’s loggers also pay careful attention to both the birds and freshwater fish in the region. As the crew progresses in logging Noland Mountain, they not only leave behind “an ever-widening wasteland of stumps and slash,” but they also damage the area’s freshwater ecosystems. The creeks around the loggers are “awash with dead trout. Even the more resilient knottyheads and shiners eventually succumbed, some flopping onto banks as if even the ungillable air offered greater hope of survival” (Rash 115). Deforestation does more than destroy the natural makeup of a region, it impacts both its land and aquatic ecosystems as well.

The first mention of animals in the Bible occurs when God creates them in Genesis 1.20-22. Genesis 1.21 refers to each animal as a “living creature,” and Morris notes that “The ‘living creature’ is the same as the ‘living soul,’ so that this act of creation can be understood as the creation of the entity of conscious life which would henceforth be an integral part of every animate being, including man” (69). Morris arrives at this conclusion after discussing that the word “life” (*nephesh* in Hebrew) occurs for the first time in Genesis 1.20, and in Hebrew, *nephesh* is typically used to refer to both the life of animals and the soul of man. Again, God observes his creation of the animals as “good,” and He places a high value on every living thing.

That said, the way the Boston Lumber Company discounts how their logging impacts the ecosystem displays just how little Serena and Pemberton care for the wildlife unlike Adam and Eve who dressed the garden of Eden, kept it, and exhibited dominion over the animals in it.

In addition to the fish, Rash mentions the Carolina parakeet, a bird that was vividly described in the early naturalist writings of William Bartram but has since become extinct. While Rash describes the bird and “its body and long tapering tail green as emerald, head a vibrant yellow” as it vanishes “into the uncut trees,” the Carolina parakeet was most likely already extinct by the late 1920s when the novel is set (216). Beilfuss argues that “this little anachronism adds to the tragedy of the novel, especially since the likely cause of the birds’ extinction was deforestation” (389). While Pemberton and Serena are not described as being the cause of the Carolina parakeet’s extinction, timber companies similar to the Boston Lumber Company did drive the bird out of the Appalachian region. In Genesis 1.22, God said, “let fowl multiply in the earth,” yet instead of multiplying, the parakeet was forced into extinction by mankind.

Rash also mentions other animal species in *Serena* such as mountain lions. An avid hunter, Pemberton desires to shoot a mountain lion before he leaves the Appalachian area; however, Lang argues that this desire only “reinforces his [Pemberton’s] indifference to nature’s well-being” since the species was already essentially extinct by 1920 (86-87). Still Rash notes in *Serena* that there is “quite a bit of lore” about the mountain lion that keeps Pemberton believing one remains so that he can track, hunt, and kill it (6). Unlike Pemberton, Adam never desired to track and kill any species of animal while in the garden of Eden. Adam’s relationship with the animals is described in Genesis 2.19, “And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof.” Morris

contends, “God arranged for Adam to become familiar with many of the animals by personal inspection. This was apparently for the twofold purpose of acquainting him with his responsibilities relative to the animal kingdom and also of emphasizing to him that, though he could exercise rulership over them, he could not have fellowship with them” (96). Because none of the animals in the kingdom were qualified or suitable to help Adam, God created Eve “as a help meet for him” (Genesis 2.20).

As for what Adam and Eve’s responsibilities were in the garden of Eden, Genesis 1.28 reads, “... and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” As my introduction states, some individuals and companies take Genesis 1.28 out of context in order to argue that their abuse of the land and its creatures is justifiable; however, according to Morris, “This twofold commission to subdue and have dominion, to conquer and rule, embraces all productive human activities. Science and technology, research and development, theory and application, study and practice ... are various ways of expressing these two concepts” (77). This commission has never been repealed, and it is referenced several more times in the Bible, such as in Psalm 8.6-8 and Hebrews 2.8. The problem is that Pemberton and Serena choose to forgo their responsibilities as stewards in favor of abusing the earth to satisfy their personal greeds.

Conclusion

All in all, a biblical ecocritical reading of *Serena* reveals that humans have drastically moved away from the prelapsarian ways in which God called them to act as stewards of the Earth. It is imperative to state that even though *Serena* is fiction, it still maintains a historical relevancy. While this particular study on *Serena* has focused on the ways in which Rash’s

postlapsarian Appalachian landscape and its people differ from the prelapsarian landscape and the first people, there are characters in the novel who challenge the Pembertons and represent the original conservationists who attempted to preserve the region in the form of a national parks system.

Berger notes about the timber industries of the 1920s, “The giant trees were a lumberman’s dream, but the legacy of destruction the industry had left behind across the nation was beginning to catch up with it. An era of forest regulation was beginning” (Berger 38). Interestingly, forest conservation did not originally become a public policy out of people’s love of forests. Instead, the movement was a reaction to what Berger refers to as “the unregulated and wasteful destruction of forests and other natural resources so common in early America” (44). In *Serena*, profit always seems to triumph over ethics, and while the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is eventually formed, it did not occur until after lumber companies—like the Boston Lumber Company—cleared away acres of timber and altered much of Appalachia’s ecosystem. Lang notes on the historical accuracy of Rash’s novel, “the pattern of absentee land ownership that the Boston Lumber Company represents has long plagued Appalachia, with such corporations extracting the region’s rich natural resources while impoverishing its residents” (86). While Rash’s novel makes the reader believe that the national parks system will bring an end to deforestation, similar acts are still occurring today. Due to a lack of ecological knowledge and public concern, both state and federal governments allow comparable practices to continue (Berger 5). Berger notes that there is a good form of forestry which allows man to maintain his call to stewardship over the land. Such forestry demands that an individual or company commit to maintaining the land after it has been logged to control erosion and promote the regrowth of future generations of plants (112).

Regrettably, there are still Serena and George Pemberton-like people who strip the land of its beauty for its resources. While Rash's setting is not necessarily a coal-mining region, his descriptions of the Appalachian region parallel contemporary extraction strategies such as mountaintop removal coal mining, the main focus in Ann Pancake's novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. In her piece "The Logging Legacy Unchained: In *Serena*, Rash Lays Bare the Real Story of the Smokies Timber Boom," Becky Johnson notes that Ron Rash "can't help but wonder, what happens when the last coal is removed?" Clearly, Rash expected his historical fiction novel *Serena* to have a contemporary significance, especially since the recent George W. Bush presidency suggested selling the timber rights in national parks. Not only does *Serena* encourage readers to acknowledge current environmental concerns such as mountaintop-removal coal mining, but it also prompts readers to reflect on how far humankind has strayed from those initial days of creation and Adam and Eve's prelapsarian stay in the utopian garden of Eden.

CHAPTER 3

A BIBLICAL ECOCRITICAL ANALYSIS OF

ANN PANCAKE'S *STRANGE AS THIS WEATHER HAS BEEN*

Published in 2007, a year prior to Ron Rash's *Serena*, Ann Pancake's debut fiction novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been* details a single Appalachian family's insalubrious dealings with a mountaintop removal coal mining company. Set in rural Yellowroot Hollow, West Virginia, Pancake uses the distinctive voices of six characters—Corey, Dane, Bant, Lace See, Uncle Mogey, and Avery—to demonstrate the range of relationships between individuals (children and adults) and the Appalachian land they think of as home. Spanning from the mid-1980s to 2000, the novel covers a range of time when the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection actually permitted extensive mountaintop removal operations in areas similar to Pancake's fictional Yellowroot Hollow (Houser 100). As the novel progresses, Pancake inserts historical events such as the Buffalo Creek flood of 1972 and the Martin County, Kentucky, spill of 2000 so that as the novel progresses, it begins to resemble more of a non-fiction account of the end times, specifically mankind's last days in the Appalachian region.

Born in 1963, Romney, West Virginia, native Ann Pancake witnessed at an early age how strip mining was affecting her home. Even though Pancake and her family moved from Summersville, West Virginia, to Romney when she was only eight, she still remembers being able to observe strip mining from her Summerville home (West). In an interview with novelist Robert Gipe, Pancake describes her childhood experiences with coal, "When I was little, I was always on the periphery of coal. We didn't live in a coal camp. We lived in the county seat. So I had the experience of seeing miners in the grocery store covered in black after their shifts and being kind of frightened by that and also interested" (172). Aside from living amidst operating

coal companies, Pancake's father, a Presbyterian preacher, further swayed her outlook on strip-mining and mountaintop removal, since he often preached against such practices (Block). When Pancake was around the age of six, her father preached an anti-strip-mining sermon which Pancake recounts "took some guts because it was a middle-class church, and there were a number of people who were coal owners or operators in the church . . . my dad taught me to have a pretty early consciousness about strip-mining" (qtd. in Gipe 172). Pancake's religious background, along with her personal dealings with strip-mining and mountaintop removal coal mining, lead me to believe that a biblical ecocritical analysis of *Strange as This Weather Has Been* may reveal more about the characters' differing opinions on the landscape and the novel's operating coal mining company, Lyon Energy.

Both of Ann Pancake's parents were from West Virginia, and, depending which relative of Pancake's one traces, her familial relationship with the Appalachian region stretches back anywhere from five to seven generations. In her interview with Gipe, Pancake discusses her ancestral connection to her homeland, "I was raised on a farm that we'd had in our family since the late 1700s. So it was drilled into me how important it was and how we weren't supposed to sell it or develop it. That was a really important influence in terms of my connection to the environment and to the land" (173). Pancake's connection to the environment and her ancestral relationship with the land are two key biographical details that seem to display themselves in primary characters such as Lace See and her daughter Bant.

As for her inspiration for writing the novel, Pancake stated in a different interview that the concept for *Strange as This Weather Has Been* stemmed from helping her sister create a documentary film on mountaintop removal, *Black Diamonds: Mountaintop Removal and the Fight for Coalfield Justice* (Gilbert). Upon questioning West Virginia residents who were

suffering from the effects of mountaintop removal, Pancake admitted that she felt motivated to “write fiction that could help readers understand their lives” (qtd. in Gilbert). She goes so far as to dedicate *Strange as This Weather Has Been* to “the people in the central Appalachian coalfields who struggle against catastrophe daily.” Even in the brief dedication of her novel, Pancake refers to what is happening to the West Virginia landscape as “catastrophe.” Although the word “catastrophe” may appear like an exaggeration at first, as the novel advances and the characters and postlapsarian landscape are negatively impacted by mountaintop removal, it becomes clear that Pancake’s word selection is more than accurate and acceptable.

According to environmental literature professor Heather Houser, Pancake’s novel “chronicles the transition from timber logging to the most destructive of coal mining techniques, mountaintop removal (MTR)” (96). While Ron Rash’s *Serena* introduces readers to the devastating timber logging practices of the past, Pancake’s novel describes a mining technique that is still being primarily employed in Appalachian states like West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. For convenience and clarity, the biblical ecocritical analysis of *Strange as This Weather Has Been* that follows is separated into the following sections: Mountaintop Removal in Pancake’s Appalachia, Ancestral Character Connections to Appalachia, The Flood and Alterations to the Appalachian Landscape, Trees and Vegetation in Yellowroot Hollow, West Virginia’s Polluted Water Sources, The Loss of Wildlife, and God and the End of Times.

Mountaintop Removal in Pancake’s Appalachia

When *Strange as This Weather Has Been* opens during the mid-1980s from Lace See’s perspective, the reader is immediately drawn into the landscape as Pancake’s observant eleven-year-old narrator describes running past natural West Virginia locations such as Yellowroot

Creek, Yellowroot Road, and Ricker Run. While the opening chapter sets the scene, it is not until the second chapter—a present-day chapter told from Lace See’s daughter Bant’s point of view—that mountaintop removal is brought to the foreground. As Bant and her father Jimmy Make trespass onto Lyon Energy’s mountaintop removal site, the reader initially gets a vivid description of the grass leading up to the side. Bant recollects, “That year had been a wet spring and early summer, and it seemed the plants had grown to a green you could taste. Green like the plants were trying to make up for the other” (Pancake 14). By the time readers get to the end of Bant’s description, they realize that the natural vegetation Bant describes is being forced to compete with “the other,” in this case the unnatural coal company and its manipulation of the landscape.

From a biblical ecocritical perspective, the energizing agent for the creation of the mountains was the Word of God. Genesis 1.9-10 reads, “And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry *land* appear: and it was so. And God called the dry *land* Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that *it* was good.” Not only does God observe the dry land as “good,” but He continually references his laying of the foundations of Earth throughout the Old Testament such as in Isaiah 48.13. Bible scholar Henry Morris states on the creation of dry land in Genesis 1.9, “Finally, surfaces of solid earth appeared above the waters and an intricate network of channels and reservoirs opened up in the crust to receive the waters retreating off the rising continents” (61). All these actions lead one to assume that God was proud of his creations, and that notion is further depicted in a later scene from Pancake’s novel between elderly environmentalist Charlie and Lace See. A native of West Virginia, he explains to Lace that “The hardest thing of all about living through this, hasn’t been the blasting or the dust or the flooding or the fires or how they

broke the community. It's looking up there each morning, at a landscape you had around you every day of your life. And seeing your horizon gone" (Pancake 309). Charlie grieves the loss of his horizon by reflecting on the times before mountaintop removal altered his land, a landscape initially voiced into existence and allotted an inherent worth by God.

In the days following Earth's formation, God formed humankind to tend to his creations. Genesis 2.15 reads, "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." In prelapsarian times, man was commissioned to care for God's garden home. Matthew Sleeth notes in his essay "Moving from Faith to Works" that "The earth was designed to sustain every generation's *needs*, not to be plundered in an attempt to meet one generation's *wants*" (98). Unfortunately, man's prelapsarian duty to care for the land does not seem to be of a present concern to many people, and it is Avery in Pancake's novel who perhaps describes the conditions of the land best when he refers to the destruction of the land as a disaster that is cumulative (239). Even Scott states in her book *Removing Mountains: Extracting Nature and Identity in the Appalachian Coalfields* that the president of an Appalachian coal company commented, "'We need to redo the topographic maps every two years,' a statement that signals both his assumption of a total domination of nature and the relentless pace of MTR" (86). This comment shows that man is doing more than merely sustaining their needs. Companies such as the one depicted in Pancake's novel are taking advantage of the land at alarming rates, all to meet their greed.

Although Pancake does not go into much detail on the history or process of mountaintop removal in her novel, it is clear that generations of characters have lived with an array of companies stripping the mountains for its resources. Her reflective character Lace See briefly touches on the history of mining in Yellowroot Hollow: "We'd lived with the stripping since the

'50s, but we'd always hated it. I remember vivid how hurt and mad Mom and Dad were over what the company did to the one side of Yellowroot back in the '70s. But now we heard rumors that the operations were getting bigger than anyone'd imagined" (Pancake 186). Although the bulldozers do not arrive on Yellowroot Mountain until the spring of 1999, in West Virginia, the practice of mountaintop removal first arrived in the 1970s (Pancake 275). Houser remarks that since the 1970s, mountaintop removal has become "a more technologically dependent process that uses enormous machines and millions of pounds of explosives to reengineer the land based on geological readings from electronic sensors and computer models" (99). Due to these technological advancements, along with improvements in machinery, removing coal has become a more efficient process that allows extractive companies to make large sums of money. Unfortunately, as strip mining and mountaintop removal gained momentum, there was a lack of governmental regulations which West Virginia native and scholar Ronald Eller argues "left thousands of acres of hillsides gouged and decapitated and hundreds of miles of streams polluted with acid runoff" (211). It is no doubt that coal is being used to feed America's energy addiction, and just over the past two decades, over 500 miles of West Virginia mountainside have been destroyed (Merritt 118). Jonathan Merritt states additional facts about West Virginia in his book *Green like God: Unlocking the Divine Plan for Our Planet*:

More than three hundred thousand acres of this state have now received surface mining permits, and less than 1 percent of the mined land is ever reused for any development purpose whatsoever. The poor people of this land are the victims of injustice and greed, the land that God loves is being pillaged, and most Americans aren't doing a thing. (119)

Merritt's claim that the residents of West Virginia are the victims of mountaintop removal is exhibited in Pancake's novel through older characters such as Uncle Mogeey and Mrs. Taylor,

who have both been subject to multiple effects of strip mining and mountaintop removal over the years.

Appalachian native Scotty Cox describes in layman's terms what mountaintop removal is and what coal companies are doing to "God's country," a phrase frequently used by both residents and non-residents to describe the Appalachia region and its natural riches:

The coal companies are destroying God's country. They raze a mountainside, using dozers to plow up the earth, ripping trees from the ground with huge tractors. Brush is cleared and then the debris is set ablaze. Dynamite is used to blow up the landscape. Holes are dug for explosives, charges are set and mountaintops are literally blown apart. As much as 800 to 1,000 feet of the mountaintops are blasted off in order to reach the coal seams that lie underneath. Huge draglines push the resulting millions of tons of wasted rock, dirt, and vegetation into surrounding valleys, burying miles and miles of streams under piles of rubble hundreds of feet deep. (223)

Cox's nonfiction account of mountaintop removal operating along the Appalachian mountainside is eerily similar to the fiction accounts of Pancake's characters in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. When Bant first trespasses onto the mountaintop removal site with her father, she solemnly refers to Yellowroot Mountain as "dead" and goes on to describe how the mountain has been manipulated by Lyon Energy: "... after they blasted the top off the mountain to get the coal, they had no place to put the mountain's body except dump it in the head of the hollow. So there it loomed. Pure mountain guts. Hundreds of feet high, hundreds of feet wide. Yellowroot Mountain blasted into bits, turned inside out, then dumped into Yellowroot Creek" (20). When compared to Cox's nonfiction report on the Appalachian mountainside, it is evident that Pancake's fictitious

depictions of mountaintop removal in West Virginia are not inflated renderings of an imagined future but grim portrayals of the present reality for the people living in Appalachia.

An aspect of mountaintop removal that is repeatedly described in Pancake's novel is sediment ponds, since they are one of the leading poisonous effects of mountaintop removal. Early in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, Bant informs the reader that Lyon Energy is not keeping up with the ponds and that they "were jammed with stuff" (Pancake 16). As the novel progresses, she describes passing the ponds: "I was passing those sediment ponds, simmering in themselves, so green with God-didn't-even-know-what I couldn't see a quarter inch under their surface" (101). The idea that even God—an omniscient entity—could not even see what was in the sediment ponds leads the reader to assume that coal companies are so mighty that they have overreached what God is capable of perceiving. As for what is actually in sediment ponds, Brian Black notes in his article "A Legacy of Extraction: Ethics in Energy Landscape of Appalachia":

Each year coal washing produces thousands of gallons of contaminated water that looks like black sludge and contains toxic chemicals and heavy metals. The sludge, or slurry, is often stored behind earthen dams in huge sludge ponds. In Appalachia today, it is estimated that there are seven hundred such impoundment pools. Various referred to as slurry ponds, sludge lagoons, or waste basins, they impound hundreds of billions of gallons of toxic black water and sticky black goo, byproducts of cleaning coal. (45-46)

The ponds so vividly described by Bant are filled with toxic chemicals that pollute water sources inhabited by animals and used by humans. In the Bible, Ezekiel 34.18 reads, "*Seemeth it a small thing unto you to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pastures? And to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet?*" This verse displays just how far humans have come since those initial days in

the garden of Eden. The sediment ponds mentioned in Pancake's novel are a "small thing" to Lyon Energy, but to residents like Bant and her siblings, the ponds are just one of the toxic effects spawned by mountaintop removal.

Interestingly, Scott notes that "MTR is all but invisible to the casual observer.... MTR is rapidly becoming a part of the everyday landscape, making its drastic alterations of this landscape seem ordinary" (1). In the novel, the teenage Bant admits that like most people in her region, she has observed only the edges of a mountaintop removal mine site until she has ventured up Yellowroot with her father. Two days after viewing the mountainside, Bant is further exposed to photographs of the site which she describes for the reader: "Hacked gray stumps where mountain peaks had been, and flung all over, skinless white snakes. Roads. A gigantic funnel, sloppy and dark, running down off it, funnel big as the mountain itself, *is the mountain itself*, then *fill*, it made a dry place in my mouth" (58). For Bant, mountaintop removal has yet to become a part of her everyday landscape, so the scene in the picture leaves her addled; however, there are older characters like Bant's Uncle Mogey who are clearly aware of how coal companies have overtaken the region. He states,

"In this valley now we are completely surrounded by the mining. Soon it'll be directly over top the house. And it's across Route 9, too, across the river, those mountains being taken not only by Lyon, but by Arch, then you go south—more Lyon, some Peabody—and you go north, it's there, too." (Pancake 174)

It is as if the machinery has overtaken the mountains, so much so that even the residents are calling the land by the names of the coal companies operating on it.

Within the Bible, mountains are referenced in not only a physical sense, but a symbolic and prophetic sense as well. Typically mentioned during different trials and tribulations

throughout the Old and New Testaments, it may be argued that Pancake's Appalachian characters are going through a time of tribulation that is still being experienced by Appalachian residents today. Nahum 1.5, Psalm 97.5-6, and Habakkuk 3.6 are just a few of the Old Testament Bible verses that mention mountains. While none of these descriptions occur during prelapsarian times, they do idealize the mountains and compare their majesty to that of the creator. Even Jesus, a popular historical figure described mostly in the New Testament, would often go up on a mountainside or into the wilderness to pray or draw closer to His God. This is analogous to both Lace, Bant, and Uncle Mogey who each venture into the Appalachian Mountains for clarity or inspiration. For example, about half way through the novel, Uncle Mogey states, "Although I have been a Christian all my life, I have never felt in church a feeling anyplace near where I get in the woods.... Even when I prayed in a church, I couldn't make much come, where woods, I had only to walk in them. To walk in woods was a prayer" (Pancake 168). Similarly, after healing a leper, Jesus is described by the disciple Luke as retreating into the woods: "And he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed" (Luke 5.16). For both Jesus Christ and Uncle Mogey, going into the wilderness induces prayer.

In *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, Pancake acknowledges the differing opinions surrounding mountaintop removal. While Bant and Lace See seem to hold a more prelapsarian mindset, other residents such as Lace's husband Jimmy Make exhibit a purely postlapsarian outlook on mountaintop removal. Jimmy goes so far as to tell Lace, "Honey, you won't never beat coal. It's who has the money, the rich people always win, that's how it's always been, especially in the state of West Virginia. That's why the smart people get out" (276). For Jimmy and coal companies like Lyon Energy, the land is tied with the economics of the state and nation. After stating that she believes coal companies can find a less ruinous way to take from the land,

Lace See mentions some of the other perspectives held by locals. Some characters in the novel refer to mountaintop removal as “a good thing, said knocking off the mountaintops provided flat land and cheap coal” (Pancake 301). Other characters admit that mountaintop removal “wasn’t pretty” but that they have no choice but to accept the circumstances since coal is the only resource the land has (301). These differing opinions within the novel are consistent with the opinions of residents living in West Virginia towns today. Merritt states, “Some lawmakers, including Christian advocacy groups with a penchant for defending big corporations, have turned a blind eye to this atrocity. They claim that strip mining is good for the economy and that people aren’t really suffering that badly” (119). While some people might argue that mountaintop removal is good, there are plenty of victims—some represented as characters in Pancake’s novel—who would and have countered that argument. Scott argues that some individuals believe it is blasphemy for pro-mountaintop removal humans to argue they can alter God’s original creation to better service the goals of humans (83).

Despite being fiction, *Strange as This Weather Has Been* includes multiple references to historical events. Mrs. Taylor, an elderly lady whom Dane (Lace’s son) takes care of, has lived through so many mountaintop removal coal mining company extractions that she is certain “one company or another’s bound to drown me before I die a natural death” (Pancake 45). While Pancake includes a list of non-fiction accidents related to mountaintop removal in the novel, the event most discussed among the characters is the 1972 Buffalo Creek incident, which was caused by a dam that burst due to strip mining (236). Merritt describes the incident in the following passage: “Approximately 138 million gallons of black wastewater from the Buffalo Creek Coal Company flooded the narrow hollow, spoiling the land, killing 125 people, and leaving thousands homeless” (119). Portrayed in depth for roughly a dozen pages, Pancake’s character

Avery relives the tragic event of his youth, and then goes on to deliberate what he has learned since that day. Most striking seems to be his realization that the government has put a price on human bodies, and the price of a body can vary based on the state. Avery “learned that in the state of West Virginia, at the time of Buffalo Creek, a body’s value was capped at \$110,000. He learned that some Buffalo Creek family members got for their dead no more than a couple thousand bucks” (237). Genesis 1.27 states that God created man in his own image, so it may be argued that a price cannot and should not be put on man, and yet, due to postlapsarian events such as the Buffalo Creek incident, humans have been allotted a price. They have become an expendable commodity.

It may be that the prophetic book of Isaiah is most comparable to the setting of Pancake’s novel. The Old Testament book references a future where the mountains will one day be removed from the Earth. Isaiah 54.10 reads, “For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee....” Regardless of whether this verse is meant to be read in a literal or metaphorical way, the residents of Yellowroot Hollow, West Virginia, are experiencing a time when the mountains are physically departing from them. Even Bant, one of the younger characters of *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, describes Yellowroot Mountain as being amputated by blasts, and she goes so far as to refer to the site as “the ass-end of the world” (Pancake 165). This apocalyptic vision of the Appalachian region, along with other descriptions of the dilapidating mountain conditions, leaves most of the characters questioning whether the mountains will ever be restored to their original paradisiacal state. Lace reflects, “if anything ever came back besides the grasses and shrubs the company sprayed on, it wouldn’t be for at least several hundred more years” (Pancake 268). While Lace See hopes for a time when the land will recover, outside observers such as Mrs. Taylor’s son Avery predict the opposite will

occur. After hearing his mother's many complaints on "some new kind of crazy strip mining," Avery decides to check out what is going on in the mountains himself. Upon observing the Appalachian landscape, he inwardly reflects on the land, "Killed again and again, and each time, the place rising back on its haunches, diminished, but once more alive. . . . Only this, Avery knows, will finally beat the land for good" (Pancake 239). Perhaps even the younger characters like Bant recognize that the land has fallen subject to man's desire for money and energy. After Bant is taken to the top of Yellowroot by her beau R. L., she falls, and as she falls, she refers to the mountain as "crucified, dead, and buried, the end of something" (Pancake 330). Mountaintop removal has led to the crucifixion of her beloved West Virginia mountains, and there is little hope that Pancake's Appalachian landscape will ever resurrect itself.

Ancestral Character Connections to Appalachia

Within *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, the ancestral character connections to the land are an important theme that stem from Pancake's own generational relationship with West Virginia. The history of the people in Pancake's novel is tied to the Appalachian landscape, and this ancestral connection between the people and the land is initially exhibited when Lace See admits naming her daughter Bantella Ricker See "because it made her more of this place" (137). Early in the novel, Bant considers the family history of her name, "I also knew it was the Ricker meant the most because Rickers had been on this piece of ground at the foot of Cherryboy, west of Yellowroot, for more than two hundred years" (Pancake 34). Even Mrs. Taylor, a secondary character, discusses her ancestral connection to the land: "There have always been Ratliffs in this hollow! My father bought these two lots in 1928, and we *worked* for what *we* have!" (49). While this connection is not explored, it verifies the notion that this ancestral connection to the land belong to characters other than Lace See's family. Environmental group leader Charlie even

questions where this potent pull springs from: "...maybe it was something about the mountains' layers. Something about everything layered in them dead. All that once-live stuff, strange animals and plants, giant ferns and ancient trees, trapped down there for 250 million years, captured, crushed, and hard-squeezed into—power" (Pancake 312). For Charlie, this pull to the land is connected to the original creation of the Earth and its built-up history. It is worth noting that within this quotation Charlie is also referencing how coal is formed over time through the layering of dead vegetation. Based on the provided scriptures in Genesis, there is no doubt that God's original land—including the garden of Eden—was teeming with plant life; however, Genesis 7 explains that God's original vegetation was covered when he decided to flood all the land. According to geologist Dr. Andrew Snelling:

If half the planet was once a supercontinent above the ocean and floating forest mats covered half of the ocean itself, then as much as 75 percent of the earth's pre-Flood surface could have been covered by lush vegetation—more than six times the area covered by vegetation on the present earth's surface. These calculations would thus indicate there was more than enough lush vegetation growing on the pre-Flood earth surface to provide the volume of vegetation to form today's coal beds.

Snelling further states that if all the available plant life on Earth were converted to coal today, it would only amount to three percent of the Earth's existing coal reserves. That said, the same "power" that is pulling people like Charlie to fight for the Appalachian Mountains is the same "power" that mountaintop removal companies like Lyon Energy are drawn to extract.

Bant's connection to the land derives from her family's past connection to Yellowroot Hollow as well as the Appalachian land's enigmatic capacity to pull its natives back. Pancake stated in her interview with West, "Appalachia has an almost mysterious pull on people who

grow up there, even on people who aren't native but who have lived there a long time. As a teenager, I felt very strongly the push/pull relationship with West Virginia I still feel." Pancake expands on this notion of the "push/pull relationship" by describing that pull from multiple characters' perspectives and having the novel span generations. For instance, Uncle Mogeey describes leaving Appalachia and seeing other mountains. He claims that unlike people in the West, Appalachian natives live in their mountains, and the mountains hold them (Pancake 173). This concept is further emphasized by Lace, who at a young age experienced homesickness for the mountains.

After living for a time in North Carolina, Lace describes the pull she has to return to West Virginia, "It must have come from those that bore me, and from those that bore them. From those who looked on it, ate off it, gathered, hunted, dug, planted, loved, and bled on it, who finally died on it and are now buried in it. Somehow a body knows" (Pancake 199). Even after Lace becomes pregnant with Bant, Lace is encouraged to get outside and help Mogeey dig ramps. She states that her mother, Bant's grandmother, had always managed to keep the "old-time ways," and she goes on to reiterate her mother's motto, "Everything was put in them [the mountains] for a reason" (Pancake 94). The elderly in Pancake's novel insist that one could live off the mountains. However, as the effects of mountaintop removal become more pronounced, the present generation, represented by Bant, is already struggling to live off the land as their relatives have done before them. Pancake contrasts these differences between generations by allowing her older characters use phrases such as "never seen" and "used to be" (216-17).

One day while Lace and her father are up in the mountains, she comments on his health. A retired miner, her father's lungs have been "buried" by coal, yet he still wants to be

surrounded by the Appalachian landscape. Reflecting on her father's condition, Lace asks herself:

Why do we have to love it like we do? The Bible says we are made of dust, but after that making, everybody else leaves the dirt and lives in air, except us, oh no. We eat off it, dig in it, doctor from it, work under it. Us, we grow up swaddled in it, ground around our shoulders, over top our heads, we work both the top and the underside the earth, we are surrounded. And still, Daddy wanting nothing at the end but to sit and look at land. Even though inside it drowns him. (Pancake 151)

The excerpt above displays the notion that the Appalachian people have a natural pull to the land that not even coal companies and their removal techniques can take away from Appalachia's inhabitants. Additionally, Bant makes a specific reference to Genesis 3.19—"for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"—the biblical notion of mankind's being formed from the Earth. While the excerpt describes prelapsarian-like qualities similar to those exhibited by Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, there is never any mention in Genesis of the land metaphorically drowning Adam or Eve as it seems to do Lace's father. The experience Lace's father is having is a postlapsarian result of man's desire to dominate the land instead of act as its steward.

Even in her final days of pregnancy, Lace finds herself asking the question, "*What is it? What makes us feel for our hills like we do?*" (Pancake 99). As for an answer, all she can come up with is the following: "Grow up shouldered in them, them forever around your ribs, your hips, how they hold you, sit astraddle, giving you always, for good or for bad, the sense of being held. It had something to do with that hold" (Pancake 99). Unfortunately, Houser notes that "Lace See's generation is the last to experience residues of the commons under extraction, and memories of working the land cement connections to family, neighbors, and Yellowroot Hollow"

(98). When Lace discovers that the coal company has been given an additional permit for mining the mountains, she examines why she—representative of the Appalachian people—feels a loss for their land. She states, “This is why. Its gradual being taken away for the past hundred years, by timber, by coal, and now, outright killed, and the little you have left, mind thinking, heart knowing, a constant reminder of what you’ve lost and are about to lose” (Pancake 271). Lace mourns for the land that has disappeared in years past, and she extends her lamentation to the land she knows her children and their children will lose long after she is gone.

At the age of fifteen, Houser further argues, “Bant stands on the precipice of the extinction of the commons, her community, and ecological knowledge as MTR extraction encloses and heaves the land. Her elders describe the access restrictions mining companies have imposed since MTR came to the region” (98). It seems Bant is aware of this notion, since she leads her younger brother Corey up to the mountaintop removal site and states, “There you go, Corey. There you go. *You kids won’t have nothing but to clean up their mess*” (Pancake 166). In Jeremiah 2.7, God states, “And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination.” Locals like Lace See and Bant cannot be blamed for the vast extent of defilement inflicted on their region. Once companies like Lyon Energy, and even the Pemberton’s timber company in Ron Rash’s *Serena*, discover the “fruits” the Appalachian Mountains had to offer, they take advantage of those resources, and this exploitation continues today despite God’s originally calling humans to act as stewards of the Earth.

The Flood and Alterations to the Appalachian Landscape

After Pancake introduces her readers to mountaintop removal mining, she describes a flood that occurs in Yellowroot as a result of the mountaintop removal. Told from different

characters' perspectives, the flood acts as an instigating event that pushes characters either to leave the region or to stay and fight for the land. Interestingly, Pancake tells the story of the flood in reverse. She begins by having her characters describe some of the unnatural conditions that have resulted due to the flood. For instance, in one of Bant's early chapters, she ventures into the full woods behind her house, and the description of the woods makes the place appear almost Edenic. For instance, Pancake writes on the weather and landscape, "That year had been a wet spring and early summer, and it seemed the plants had grown to a green you could taste" (Pancake 14). This green brush, however, gets harder to find as Lyon Energy destroys more of the landscape. Later in the novel, Bant states on being in the "full woods," "Up here, you couldn't hear the machinery working. You couldn't see any sign of the flood" (Pancake 35). Because Bant has to travel into the inner woods to get away from the unnatural sounds and disasters caused by mountaintop removal, readers are led to believe that the natural world is slowly being overtaken by the mechanical world.

One of the more thorough descriptions of the flood event occurs during one of Dane's chapters. While watching Mrs. Taylor, Dane hears an unusual sound and thinks "a new kind of machine must be coming" (Pancake 46). He then sees the water rushing towards the house and describes the flood as "A thigh-high water wall the color of chocolate milk driving ahead of itself logs and tires and other stuff Dane didn't have time to tell what they were, more things surging and bouncing behind the wall's foaming face" (46-47). Because Dane is only twelve, his comparing the scene to moving chocolate milk may reveal his lack of knowledge on the topic of mountaintop removal. Unlike Bant whose primary concern is mountaintop removal, Dane seems to be more bothered by Mrs. Taylor's claims regarding the end of the world. Still, during the

flood, Dane does at least make note of the unnatural and material elements being carried along with the rushing water as it surges around the house.

Similarly, Dane's younger brother, Corey, offers a theatrical yet accurate interpretation of the flood, specifically all it was carrying with it: "... this second part of the flood carrying big stuff—car parts, a mattress, but mostly what Corey could see were logs, and plenty of them, and the logs were spearing at the house, the house itself cracking and ripping, and the thuds" (68). At only the age of nine, I would argue that Corey is not exactly certain what he is witnessing.

Although he knows that he is in the midst of a flood, he does not seem to know or care that the flood has occurred as a result of the Lyon Energy's mining the mountains surrounding his home.

Bant's description of the flood offers readers a more adult perspective on the scene. She describes her mother's being forced to go with the flow of the flood instead of fight against it: "the flood force pushing her ahead of herself until she fell down, caught herself, stumbled back up, a clot of plastic jugs glancing off her back, then she dropped into water on purpose this time" (Pancake 18). Sometime after the flood, Bant describes standing in the front yard of her home, "the ground still glittered, with glass, with coal, although we'd worked so hard to clean it up..." (Pancake 33). Psalms 24.1 states, "The earth *is* the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." Following the flood, Lace See and her family work to clean the area around their home, and it seems that Lace and her family are cognizant that they are responsible for seeing to the land that is the Lord's. While Pancake does not mention whether the characters are consciously religious in this scene, I believe they still exhibit stewardship by tending to the area. Unfortunately, as hard as they have work to get rid of everything left behind in the flood's wake, the ground remains littered with the unnatural.

Additionally, the flood leads to unnatural alterations in Pancake's Appalachian landscape. Initially created during the first part of the third day of creation, the foundations of Earth were eventually altered by the major flood described in Chapters 6 and 7 of Genesis. Although Pancake has yet to draw this parallel, I would argue that the flood in *Strange as This Weather Has Been* is analogous to the biblical flood that destroyed the Earth. Bant notes the first alteration in the landscape which she argues occurs due to both the flood and the coal company's blasting, "I realized the road was roughed up not just from flood damage, but from blast damage, too, and then I started seeing how big trees slid down the hollow side and water poured off the mountain in little runs where runs had never been before" (Pancake 16). Bant further observes how the erosion of the land and hollowing of the sides of the mountain will continue to lead to more flooding:

The sides of the hollow, as we got further in, more naked and scalped, more trees coming down, and up above, mostly just scraggly weeds, the ground deep-ribbed with erosion, and I told myself, yes, this is where the floods come from. From the busted ponds and the confused new shape of the land. From how the land has forgot where the water should go, so the water is just running off every which way. (Pancake 16)

According to Bant, the floods are being caused by mountaintop removal, and she goes on to personify the land as being "confused" by its new shape. A land that God created "has forgot" how to operate itself because mankind has manipulated its structure so much. Sleeth makes the claim, "All over Appalachia, mountains are being exploded to supply our addiction to coal and the electricity it supplies.... we are destroying in a few short years the streams, forests, wildlife, and access to clean water and air that God created for generations yet to come" (99). Due to the American people's excessive needs and wants, the land is suffering. The Appalachian landscape

is being altered just as much as Pancake's fictional Yellowroot Hollow. Trees are being uprooted, water sources are being polluted, wildfire is being lost, and the foundations the Lord formed on that third day of creation are being tampered with by human hands.

Trees and Vegetation in Yellowroot Hollow

While Ron Rash's characters in *Serena* were concerned with making profits off from the timber in the Appalachian region, Pancake's destructive coal company Lyon Energy cares nothing about making a profit from the trees, and even Bant notes that the company just bulldozed them over to the side to get better access to the coal (Pancake 159). Genesis 1.11 reads, "And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, *and* the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed *is* in itself, upon the earth, and it was so." The earth was raised out of the seas and made fertile. The dry land was clothed with vegetation, and God acknowledges that creation as "good" in Genesis 1.12. In prelapsarian times, the trees were Adam and Eve's sources of food; however, in the postlapsarian setting of *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, the trees are nothing but a nuisance to Lyon Energy and its competitors.

It is worth noting that a mountaintop removal site can initially be identified by the lack of trees at the top of a ridge. Scott notes in her introduction, "[O]ften an educated eye can detect a mountaintop mine signaled by sparse tree growth at the top of a ridge where normally there would be thick forest" (1). In the Appalachian region, this seemingly sporadic tree growth lines the leading interstates and highways through the West Virginia coal fields. If one is just passing through the region, he or she might not notice the differences in the tree growth, but Bant, a resident of Yellowroot Hollow, notes the change: "I gazed away from the fill to a couple left-behind trees on the ridge, raggedy" (103). For Bant, the sparse tree growth comes to symbolize the beginning of the end. She sees the wooded landscape of her beloved mountain Cherryboy and

tries to take comfort in the fact that its tree line remains untouched. Nonetheless, her false sense of comfort dissipates when she scans the next mine rim and sees “nothing live up there, but those sorry left-behind trees” (Pancake 103). While some individuals might not see cutting down a couple of ridgelines of trees as a problem, coal companies like Lyon Energy cut down more than few ridgelines.

According to Marianne Worthington’s article “Like the Mountains Richly Veined”:
The scale of ecological destruction caused by mountaintop removal mining is unfathomable, frightening, heartbreaking. For instance, nearly a half million acres of Appalachian hardwood forests have been clear cut to make way for mountaintop removal, and the mining companies don’t even attempt to salvage the timber. It goes down the side of a mountain with the rest of what the mining companies call the “overburden,” usually into streams or valleys below. (240)

Unlike Genesis 2.9, which describes the Lord growing “every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food,” the above excerpt reveals that coal mining companies do not view trees as fruit-bearing prelapsarian trees. Instead, they view trees as inconveniences not even worth being sold off for extra profits. In Yellowroot Hollow, the dead trees dangle all around the See family and area residents. While traveling to the mountaintop removal site with her younger brother Corey, Bant recalls, “We chinned ourselves up by the roots of the vines and scrub still left in the ground. Then everything live stopped, and the ground under the tree trunks was shale, loose dirt, and rock...” (Pancake 160). Not only are the trees uprooted, but everything live has been physically halted by Lyon Energy. At the end of the novel, Bant discovers a logjam fifteen feet deep in size which she describes as a bowl “jumbled solid with dead trees. Bulldozed trees, hundreds of them, still holding their branches, their root balls, their crowns, some still clung to

with brown leaves, those trees colored like the trees in the fall, dull colors that had nothing to do with the woods” (Pancake 352). After seeing this logjam, Bant predicts their house will be the first to be impacted if a flood were to occur, and she runs off to tell her mother.

Uncle Mogeey gives readers the most vivid depiction of the vast loss of vegetation that has occurred in their region. He tells readers:

For a long time, it was the trees dying scared me worst. I don't mean how they clear-cut the mountains before they blow them up, although of course that's an awful thing....

What scared me was the trees that are slowly dying. You don't really notice, that's why it's scariest, until one day it just dawns on you—how long's it been since I seen a mulberry tree? A butternut? Ain't there more logs down than there used to be, or am I just nervous.... The scariest is when things are lost before you know what you're losing.

(Pancake 176)

As an older man who has learned to live off the land at a young age, Mogeey is observant when it comes to nature. He is familiar with the different species of trees, and he notes the rising number of dead logs. Mogeey seems to be think that individuals will not realize what trees and natural resources they have lost until those resources are destroyed by companies like Lyon Energy.

Although such an extreme sacrifice of the Appalachian landscape may seem like a new idea to some, the land and its resources have been regularly plundered for over a hundred years. Mrs. Taylor's son Avery even states that the entire Appalachian region has “been killed at least once” (Pancake 238). Even if second- and third- growth trees grow back in the Appalachian region, there will be fewer species of trees, and while there may be some individuals who acknowledge God's trees as “pleasant to the sight,” there will undoubtedly be other individuals who take advantage of the monetary “fruits” the trees—or what's under them—have to offer.

West Virginia's Polluted Water Sources

Soon after Lace encourages Bant to go with her father to see the impact Lyon Energy is having on their home, the reader learns that the local water sources have been polluted by mountaintop removal coal mining. As Bant and Jimmy Make travel along, Bant takes note of the mess the flood has caused in the creek. She lists objects floating in the water such as pop bottles, sticks, and plastic, and she even depicts the creek water as being “colored like creamed coffee left for weeks on a counter” (Pancake 16). Not only has the land been negatively impacted by mountaintop removal, but the water sources—both major and minor—have been as well. Aside from describing the separation of waters in Genesis 1, there is no mention of any prelapsarian water sources being polluted. Genesis 2.10 states, “And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads.” Clearly the river that flowed out of Eden was pure enough to keep the garden watered and fertile, an exact opposite of the water that flows around Yellowroot Hollow after the flood. It is worth mentioning that when Mrs. Taylor describes Lyon Energy’s lack of concern for the water sources, she uses a garden as her example location: “And they throw just anything in them ponds.... So who knows what all’s in that water when it comes through here. Even when it’s not that deep, you know, it’s still poison. You want that in your garden?” (202). Although the conversation between Mrs. Taylor and her son could just be casual, Mrs. Taylor could easily be alluding to the garden of Eden and its idyllic unsullied water sources. Mrs. Taylor is a particularly religious character in the novel who is known for offering such biblical comparisons, especially when she discusses the end times with Dane. On multiple occasions, she has Dane read the Bible to her and she often recites verses from memory so it is not unlikely that Mrs. Taylor might allude to the garden of Eden.

When Mrs. Taylor's son Avery arrives in Yellowroot Hollow, he finds "the hollow freshly wrecked, a wreck that begins with the plugged-up creek and the flood-trashed yards before you even get near the devastation on company land, and then there is the damage that you can't see from outside: the ruined wells..." (Pancake 211). While this damage greets him upon his arrival, as he travels up the mountainside to view the destruction his mother cannot stop talking about, he is forced to acknowledge the unhealthy conditions of the water again. Pancake writes about Avery, "He climbs past the first series of terraced ponds, the water as opaque as mustard and colored like the inside of a sick baby's diaper" (213). Although these descriptions may seem exaggerated, they are comparable to biblical passages that reference pollution.

In Numbers 35.33, God commands, "So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye *are*: for blood it defileth the land: and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it." While this verse contextually references a shedding of human, familiar blood, the principle of good stewardship remains a central component of the verse. Even in this postlapsarian setting, God has commanded Israel not to pollute the land, and He warns the people that once the land is ruined it cannot be purified. This verse enhances one's reading of Pancake's novel, and it encourages the reader to take the characters' subtle repeated descriptions of the contaminated water sources more seriously.

One day while Dane is watching Mrs. Taylor, there is a knock on the door, and Dane immediately knows it is a girl named Lucy Hill from down the street. He tells the reader that her "well has been ruined by the blasting. Mrs. Taylor's well has held up so far, so she gives the Hills water, and they cut her grass" (Pancake 69). Even some of the fresh water sources utilized by the residents have been ruined by the mining. As for how this may relate biblically, God states in Isaiah 43.20, "The beast of the field shall honour me, the dragons and the owls: because

I give waters in the wilderness, *and* rivers in the desert, to give drink to my people, my chosen.” Even after the fall of mankind, God always took care of his chosen people by providing them with simple necessities like water. For the people of Yellowroot Hollow, however, it is clear that Lyon Energy has no intention of restoring the Appalachian people’s polluted water sources or supplying them with new ones. Instead, the locals in Pancake’s novel are forced to rely on each other for the essentials that have been stripped from them due to mountaintop removal.

Throughout *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, there are repeated references to the ruined water sources in Yellowroot Hollow: water that has been polluted by the flood and streams of water that have been buried by Lyon Energy. According to Karen McElmurray’s nonfiction essay “My Mother, Breathing,” “724 miles of streams across the central Appalachian region were buried by valley fills between 1985 and 2001 (many more miles have been permitted but not yet buried” (272). The range of years mentioned by McElmurray is roughly the same set of years Pancake covers in her novel. That said, Pancake could have easily based some of her characters’ references to the lack of pure water sources on the hundreds of miles of streams that were actually buried by coal mining companies during that time span. While some of the water sources in Pancake’s novel separated into the natural and unnatural elements, there are certain water sources in Yellowroot Hollow where the natural and unnatural elements have become so mingled that even the characters cannot distinguish between what is of the water and what is in the water. For instance, as Avery observes some of the ponds in his mother’s hollow, “he can’t tell what is live and what is garbage” (Pancake 214). Moreover, when Dane attempts to locate his brother Corey, he comes to the drain inserted by Lyon Energy and observes, “A mucky ankle-deep spit crawls out of the Drain and dribbles from its mouth, and *who knows what all’s in that water*” (246). Although there is little description of the water that made up the river that flowed

out of Eden, it can be assumed that the water was fresh and unpolluted since it supplied ample nourishment to the roots of the trees and other plant life in the garden (Gen. 2.10-14). In contrast, the water sources in Pancake's novel do nothing but stall natural growth and harm the ecosystem.

The Loss of Wildlife

Connected to both the destruction of the mountainside and polluted water sources is the loss of wildlife that occurs in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. According to Jack Spadaro, a fired worker for the National Mine Health and Safety Academy, more will disappear from the region than just mountain peaks and headwater streams. He states on Appalachia:

It's one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world outside the tropics, and that will all be gone. It'll just be utterly destroyed and we'll get these vast wastelands of mountaintop removal sites where only a few species are growing. I mean we've got 250 bird species that breed in these hardwood forests and when you get to a mountaintop site you might find two or three bird species. (Spadaro 163-64)

Although Pancake's characters do not seem to be specifically concerned with the loss of bird species, they do make note of the rotting species of fish and dead crawdads that float in abundance in Yellowroot Hollow's water streams. Genesis 1.21 reads, "And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good." Even the creatures of the water were allotted an inherent worth by God; however, coal companies such as Lyon Energy seem not to find value in anything but coal.

Furthermore, Lace lists in one of her chapters some of the many toxins that are poisoning the local wildlife: "Mercury, lead, arsenic, cadmium, copper, selenium, chromium, nickel" (Pancake 266). Uncle Mogeey further explains the situation, "They've tore up our ramp and

ginseng patches, they've run off all the game. And you can't fish. Even if you found a live fish to catch, I'd be scared to eat it, you know" (Pancake 176). Even if the fish were not dead, the characters in Pancake's novel would not risk eating them. Moreover, from an early age, Bant recollects a time when Mogeys and her other older relatives would sit around and discuss the loss of different plant and animal life, "... when I least expected it, one of them would mention another thing lost. Honeybees. A ginseng patch. A type of tree" (Pancake 40). Mogeys's previous comment and Bant's reminiscence further show just how much of an impact mountaintop removal has had on the area, its people, and wildlife ecosystems.

The loss of aquatic species due to polluted water streams seems to be a fairly new effect of the mountaintop coal removal in Yellowroot, since Avery reflects on a time when there was "a creek where he and his cousins fished, caught crawdads, built their own little dams" (Pancake 217). Avery's rumination on the past seems closely related to prelapsarian times and the notion of dominion in Genesis 1.26. While all men are allotted dominion over the earth and its creatures, it appears that the way Avery has interacted with fish and crawdads is much different than the way Lyon Energy has interacted with the location wildlife.

As the novel progresses, the wildlife seems to be replaced by machinery. As Avery walks along Yellowroot Hollow, "He hears no bugs, no birds, and the water in the ponds, that is silent, too, stagnant—no sound but the machinery overhead" (Pancake 215). Although Pancake's novel ends before the characters begin feeling the full effects of the loss of wildlife in the region, Bant's grandmother does foreshadow future problems associated with killing animals. In a reflection, Bant explains to the reader that she one time killed a garter snake, and her grandmother reprimanded her. Her grandmother exclaims, "Go around just killing stuff, it'll eventually come back on you. It throws things out of whack (Pancake 39). Since the Eden story

contains an admonition against the Serpent that such will be crushed under the heel of mankind, some individuals might argue that it is irrelevant that Bant's grandmother chastises Bant for killing a snake; however, Morris states on Genesis 3.15 that while "the curse was outwardly pronounced on the serpent, its real thrust was against the malevolent spirit controlling its body and its speech, 'that old serpent called the Devil' (Revelation 12.9)" (119). With this biblical thought in mind, the grandmother's comment could foretell of what is to come to the Yellowroot Hollow ecosystems now that the vegetation and various aquatic species are dying.

God and The End of Times

Throughout *Strange as This Weather Has Been* there are recurrent references to God and the end times. Most prominent in Dane's sections of the novel, God is frequently depicted as nothing more than a reflection of Dane and his inner feelings. While trying to sleep at night, Dane will often replay his daily conversations with Mrs. Taylor. Due to Mrs. Taylor's overt religious outlook on life and Dane's lack of religious background, he is constantly fighting an inner battle with himself concerning God and the environment. Pancake writes:

Dane matched himself and God matched Dane, back then God was big enough to cover him all over, a cape. *God's trying to tell us something*, Mrs. Taylor will murmur, shaking a finger towards her roof, and beyond that, the valley fill, the mine. *God's telling us something*. And Dane believes her. But God tells Dane nothing anymore. (109)

For Dane, God is merely a mirror, a reflection of himself. Moreover, in the few instances when Dane tries to pray to God, he feels his words are not working. On one occasion, he gets frustrated and decides to tear a picture titled "Face of God in clouds over T—, Oklahoma." After he rips the picture, a tear running through the face of God, he merely looks at the paper on the weeds of the ground and reflects: "Because, truth be told, Dane had known for over a month that God

wasn't working around here anymore. God had been leaving ahead of time to get safe from this mess. Save Himself" (Pancake 117). Dane's belief that God has left Yellowroot Hollow and its residents seems to be a belief held by other residents as well. Psalm 19.1 states, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork." If the horizon and land of Yellowroot Hollow were not being manipulated by Lyon Energy, then perhaps Dane may have been able to see God's handywork; however, in the land's current deteriorating state, Dane cannot imagine a God powerful enough to overcome Lyon Energy.

While cleaning Mrs. Taylor's bedroom one afternoon, Dane's eyes are drawn to "the pamphlet," a sheet discussing the end of the world. Although Pancake references multiple Bible books in *Strange as This Weather Has Been*—2 Timothy, Luke, and Jeremiah to name a few—her character Mrs. Taylor focuses on the category of the pamphlet titled "Environment" and its associated verse from Revelation 11.18: "God will 'bring ruin to those running the earth'" (73). Due to Mrs. Taylor's obsession with the end times, Dane believes he is going to witness the end of the world. He does not want to touch the pamphlet, so much so he feels sick and has to leave Mrs. Taylor's one afternoon. Based on the studies of theology professor John Whitcomb Jr.:

Life on the planet Earth reveals the clear signs of its coming extinction. The drift of quality and order is not upward, but downward. Even as the force of gravity inevitably brings each flying arrow to the ground, so all of nature seems to be programmed to weaken, kill, and disintegrate the fantastically complex and delicately beautiful life forms that once filled the earth in vast abundance. (Preface)

While Earth does exhibit signs that it will one day go extinct, humans should not intentionally take from the Earth without considering the repercussions. For instance, although readers never get Lyon Energy's perspective on mountaintop removal, the residents and the Earth are being

negatively affected by their work, so much so that characters like Mrs. Taylor believe they are living in the end times. In bed one night, Dane reflects on Mrs. Taylor's words, "*The mountains shall be thrown down, and the steep places shall fall, and every wall shall fall to the ground,* Mrs. Taylor would say. *Ezekiel 38:20*. Open your Bible, please, and read" (Pancake 113). Dane is terrified by Mrs. Taylor and her apocalyptic thoughts, and the effects of mountaintop removal only further incite his fears.

Aside from Dane and Mrs. Taylor, there are other central characters who question God. As Lace tells Bant of the latest effects of the mining companies, Bant admits to the reader that it was hard to believe Lace and how bad things had gotten. Bant reflects, "The government or the companies or God or whoever was in charge, it seemed to me they just wouldn't let it get like that. Seemed to me like they couldn't" (Pancake 83). Mrs. Taylor counters Bant's concern, a concern voiced by others, but Dane remains uneasy about God's involvement in situation. Pancake writes, "*An act of God, they called it. Tried to blame it on him.* Mrs. Taylor says, *I say God must be getting awful tired of being blamed for what man does.* But. Still. Dane sees. God may not have done it, but God let it be done. His will be ... God smaller and farther away and no longer big enough to cover him, even little in his mind like he is" (110). These differing religious opinions are one of the main psychological effects that mountaintop removal mining seems to incite in the individuals impacted.

There is one character who refuses to accept the belief that God let mountaintop removal happen in Yellowroot Hollow. While viewing the Appalachian landscape, Uncle Mogey states, "I'd say to myself, 'Look here what God's give us.' But just about as fast as I could have that thought, this second one would come from deeper: 'This is God.'" (Pancake 173). For the older generations, God does not seem to be responsible for the destruction Lyon Energy has caused to

the area. Instead, Mogey's God "is a God of order and function in all that He does. This order has long caused men to see that a transcendent God must be behind the creation" (Jones 6). People like Mogey and even Mrs. Taylor believe that man is the party responsible for destroying what God created.

In the final pages of the novel, Pancake mentions one of the most controversial passages in the Bible: Genesis 1.26-28. Known as the verses where God gives mankind dominion over the Earth and its creatures, Pancake includes the two leading views on the concept. While Mogey admits that his "church has never spoke out against the destruction," other churches in the area have spoken against the dominion coal companies like Lyon Energy are exerting over the region (Pancake 177). Loretta Hughes, one of the more hotheaded characters in Pancake's novel, admits that while God does give man dominion of over the Earth, "Anybody with a grain of sense can see we're destroying what God made. 'The Earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,' Psalm 24. He wants us to fight for it, and I pray every day for God's help in this fight" (Pancake 347). For Loretta, fighting to keep the Appalachian land and its natural resources safe is how she intends to exercise her dominion over it.

While all resident characters seem to have their own beliefs regarding God and His responsibility towards the land, Avery, the only outsider to observe Yellowroot Hollow's condition, seems to hold another view entirely. Upon witnessing how mountaintop removal has impacted the region thus far, Avery makes the claim, "It is a glacial-pace apocalypse. The end of the world in slow motion. A de-evolution, like the making of creation in reverse. The End Times are in progress right now..." (Pancake 240). While Dane is scared into believing he is witnessing the end of times, Avery's assertion that Yellowroot Hollow is in the midst of a slow-motion apocalypse seems more grounded in fact than fear. Mountaintop removal and its many visible

effects have led Avery to believe the Appalachian region is experiencing a de-evolution, a purely postlapsarian notion.

Conclusion

In her interview with Gilbert, Pancake says that she hopes readers will finish her novel “with a better understanding of how mountaintop removal damages the day-to-day lives of people where mining operations have expanded literally into their backyards.” Based on my biblical ecocritical analysis of *Strange as This Weather Has Been*, I would argue that not only does Pancake provides readers with a more thorough understanding on the effects of mountaintop removal, she encourages readers—especially Appalachian readers—to become familiar with how their landscapes are being altered by companies like Lyon Energy.

Although Pancake’s novel does discuss a political issue, it does not go into detail on the politics, policies, and governmental regulations surrounding mountaintop removal. Scott states in her nonfiction text, “The politics of MTR lay bare the uneven roots of America’s postindustrial economy, raising questions about the meaning and direction of the American nation and Appalachia’s place within it” (137). A biblical ecocritical analysis of *Strange as This Weather Has Been* could potentially sway more conservative groups and individuals voting on environmental legislation. Isaiah 24.4-5 reads, “The earth mourneth *and* fadeth away, the world languisheth *and* fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish. The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.” As man looks for additional ways to take advantage of the Earth’s natural resources, the land God made is slowly fading away.

It is important to note that Pancake believes America is “at the beginning of the end of coal. And I think there is a wider movement, particular among younger generations in West

Virginia, which understands that our state must move beyond dependence on natural resource extraction if we are to survive as a culture and as a people” (West and Pancake). Until such a time occurs, Appalachian residents like the characters Loretta Hughes and Lace See will continue to work with government agencies to stop the removal of coal from the region. As Lace states on fighting back against the coal mining companies, “We are from her, it [fighting back] says. This is our place, it says. Listen here, it says. We exist” (Pancake 314). Those individuals that fight back against mountaintop removal and its effects are why Pancake believes younger generations are capable of moving beyond natural resource extraction.

Even if America is at “the beginning of the end of coal,” Geoffrey Buckley and Laura Allen argue in their chapter “Stories about Mountaintop Removal in the Appalachian Coalfields” that “It will take generations before such biologically diverse forests reestablish themselves, regardless of the reclamation work performed after mining operations have ceased” (164). While such a reestablishment of Appalachia’s landscapes and ecosystems seems like a fantasy, it is better to face the potential destruction head on like Lace and Bant than declare Appalachia is slowly descending into an indomitable apocalyptic state.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this thesis, I have analyzed both Ron Rash's historical fiction novel *Serena* and Ann Pancake's realistic debut novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been* from a biblical ecocritical perspective to predict how emerging Appalachian writers might portray the region in future works of fiction. It is important to remember from Chapter One that prior to the twentieth century, the pastoral idea populated most works of literature, including non-fiction travel accounts. Whereas Appalachia used to be described as a prelapsarian, utopian place, contemporary Appalachian writers like Rash and Pancake have foregone that bucolic notion in favor of depicting a more deteriorated, postlapsarian landscape. Neither of these contemporary Appalachian works refers to the land as idyllic or paradisiacal. Instead, both Rash's and Pancake's novels open in fallen settings and focus on sharing the adverse effects of over-extracting resources such as timber and coal from the region.

One identifiable reason why Rash and Pancake's novels stray from such an Edenic notion is because logging and mining were both recognized as inexorable economic forces by the mid-nineteenth century, roughly one hundred years before either Rash or Pancake were born (Houser 98). This gap in time means that both Rash and Pancake grew up in an era where the Appalachian landscape was already experiencing some of the negative effects of practices like logging and mining. While *Serena* is set at a North Carolina logging site during the late 1920s and early 1930s, *Strange as This Weather Has Been* is set in Yellowroot Hollow, West Virginia, and spans from the 1980s to early 2000s. Despite this gap in time, both novels depict the Appalachian region being stripped of its natural resources by big companies, and it may be assumed that both novelists were drawn to this concept due to their observations of the land over

time. Moreover, the novels take on more prophetic roles, both in terms of prophesying doom and urging changes in future environmental behaviors.

Based on my analyses of these two texts, I envisage that current and future Appalachian fiction writers will continue to portray a crumbling Appalachia similar to the settings described in Rash and Pancake's novels; however, I foresee postlapsarian descriptions of the land becoming more apocalyptic, perhaps to such a degree that Appalachian literature scholars will eventually need to develop a sub-genre such as environmental dystopian Appalachian fiction that includes contemporary texts such as *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been*. Because destructive extraction processes such as mountaintop removal are still operating in Appalachia, budding regional writers are witnessing the continuing ecological and geographical impacts of such process. When they read and study the works of successful twenty-first century Appalachian writers like Rash and Pancake, they are immersed in the postlapsarian landscapes of those novels. In his book *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction*, professor Peter Boxall states, "Our relationship to the future is inseparable from the emergence of a kind of global thinking, of a new conception of the relationship between our local environments and the planet as a whole" (216). Rising Appalachian writers are facing two obstacles which hinder them from describing the landscape as a prelapsarian paradise: influential contemporary texts that incorporate apocalyptic descriptions and the evolving effects of modern extraction.

Beilfuss writes of the dystopian aspects of *Serena*, "The descriptions of the wasted mountainsides, the cataloguing of vanishing species, the loss of habitat, the separation of humans and their environment—all attest to a dystopian reality in the aftermath of the Boston Lumber Company" (392). While describing such conditions as dystopian may seem like an overstatement of the conditions, my biblical ecocritical analysis of *Serena* has revealed that such postlapsarian

descriptions of the Appalachian region stray vastly from the prelapsarian details and environmental concepts located in the Bible. As for the destructive land descriptions in Pancake's novel, literary scholar Matt Wanatt comments, "... while the degree of the book's horror makes it tempting to categorize Pancake's novel as post-apocalyptic speculative fiction, the generic lines separating speculation from reality do little justice to Pancake's real-world subject" (163). Although Wanatt does not to categorize *Strange as This Weather Has Been* as a post-apocalyptic novel, I believe a biblical ecocritical analysis of Pancake's realistic text justifies classifying her novel as a work of environmental dystopian Appalachian fiction.

In addition to hypothesizing how upcoming Appalachian writers will describe the region, I also foresee a rise in the number of strong female protagonists in future regional fiction novels. Both *Serena* and *Strange as This Weather Has Been* contain very perceptive and opinionated female protagonists. Houser argues, "As the earth shifts due to mining and logging, so too do gender roles, and as fossil fuels come out of the earth, masculinity drains from these men" (104). Because most of the people employed to remove and extract resources from the Appalachian land are male, it would make sense that women and men see the deterioration of the environment differently. The wife of a coal miner, Donna Branham, describes women living in Appalachia:

To be honest, most of the men, they've made their living with the coal mines. And I think the women sit back all their lives and [have] seen their husband come in dirty and treated wrongly, and I think we've had enough of it.... I think it's up to us to step up to the plate because the men, for whatever reason, they're not quite as vocal as women. They've worked all their life *in* that, and I think it's up to us [the women] to do our own thing now. (qtd. in Bell 145)

If Appalachian women continue to vocalize their opinions on the effects of removal along with their observations of the land and their husbands, I expect future regional writers will take advantage of this type of perspective on the postlapsarian Appalachian environment.

Rash stated in an interview, “I think writers who write about a rural landscape are often viewed as being provincial, but to me the natural world is the most universal of languages” (qtd. Bjerre 224). For now, descriptions of the natural world bridge the gaps between regions and cultures; however, if the Appalachian region continues to be contaminated by extractive corporations and harvested for its resources, future Appalachian writers will struggle to communicate with the world through their more anti-utopian environmental depictions. Similar to the biblical figure Job, who advised his friends to observe the Earth for answers, contemporary Appalachian writers are going to have look to the landscape for guidance on how to depict the region (Job 12.7-8). Until corporations stop their destructive removal of the region’s natural resources and the land can begin the extensive regeneration process, there is little hope that rising Appalachian fiction writers will ever return to describing the land as a paradise comparable to the prelapsarian garden of Eden.

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